

The illustration depicts a young woman with long, dark brown hair and a small halo, smiling and holding a large, ornate sword. She is dressed in a white short-sleeved shirt with a blue sailor-style collar and a blue bow, paired with a blue and white plaid skirt. Her right leg is encased in a large, complex mechanical prosthetic. The background features a bright blue sky with a distant city skyline and a body of water. The overall style is anime-inspired with vibrant colors and detailed shading.

16

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY

Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE MIRAGE PALADIN

VISIT...

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16 STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE MIRAGE PALADIN

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

**Shizuri Kasugaya
Castiella**
Paladin
A pure and noble knight of
the fiery blade



Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

Yuuma Tokoyogi
Witch of the Blue
The Fourth Primogenitor's longtime
friend who bewitches the city

Rui Miyazumi

Magic Gunner

An exceptionally talented student
and a sniper without peer

Yuno Amase

**Beast-Person
Kung Fu Fighter**

A cheerful and carefree feline
who fights with her fists





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STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE MIRAGE PALADIN

16

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 16

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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INTRO

INTRO

The ocean roared.

Lazy waves lapped at the moonlit shore quietly and steadily.

Beneath a navy-blue sky, which complemented the vast sea, there lay a teenage boy in a soaked parka. The sky, dotted with stars, filled his entire field of vision. Silver moonlight illuminated the white, sandy beach.

The humid wind bore the scent of a summer evening. The sea spray that coated his cheek was reminiscent of fresh blood.

As if seduced by its warmth, he slowly came to life. Remnants of crushed coral slipped between his clenched fingers.

The boy had a face one might see anywhere.

He was around sixteen or seventeen years old with pale, thin hair reminiscent of a malnourished wolf's fur. Even so, he lacked distinguishing features. He was just another student, common to every habitat.

Despite having stirred, the boy remained there, prone at the edge of the waves, unable to sit up.

The drenched clothing and nighttime breeze had robbed his body of warmth, leaving him weak. His limbs were numb, as if his flesh and blood belonged to someone else. He could feel nothing but the sand against his skin. The sensation felt oddly raw and vivid.

Pushed around by the force of a wave, the boy rolled onto his back. He listlessly shook the water droplets from his face.

A moment later, he heard what sounded like footsteps on sand. Once he opened his eyes, he saw a slender human silhouette, that of a young girl wearing a fairly long coat.

She had refined, doll-like facial features, her large eyes standing out in

particular. From the gaps in the long wimple she wore, reminiscent of a nun's, protruded hair as white as snow.

She stopped at the boy's side, looking down at him without a word. Her gaze was cold.

"I've finally found you, Kojou Akatsuki."

The girl spoke with a hint of reproach in her voice. Her attitude was aggressive, but thanks to the soft, serene tenor of her voice, the impression she gave was not as barbed as her choice of words.

The boy looked back at her with bewilderment. "...Kojou...Akatsuki?"

"Do you not remember?" asked the girl, raising an eyebrow in visible exasperation. "That is your own name, is it not? You are Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor."

"I'm...the Fourth...Primogenitor?" It was an ominous-sounding title, one that the boy couldn't help casting suspicion over.

"Yes." The girl mixed a sigh with the sagging of her shoulders. "You are the fourth of the original vampires, which should not exist. You are immortal and immutable. You have no blood brethren, order is not among your desires, and you are served by twelve Beast Vassals that are destruction incarnate. You drink people's blood, thereby slaughtering and destroying them. You are a cold, heartless monster astray from all doctrines of the world—that is what you are, Kojou Akatsuki."

"So, I'm a vampire primogenitor, huh...?"

Still resting on the sand, the boy gazed at his own palms. It was an unexpectedly calm reaction. Mysteriously, he felt no distress at having been told he was the World's Mightiest Vampire.

"Do you remember now?" The white-haired girl's tone still remained cold.

He smiled. "Being told I'm one of these primogenitor-somethings doesn't ring a bell, but I do remember my own name at least."

"Very good," said the girl, nodding.

The boy named Kojou Akatsuki then sat up and stared at her. "So where am I?"

What am I doing in a place like this...?"

"This is Onrai Island."

"...Onrai Island?"

"An isolated island floating in the deep sea some three hundred and thirty kilometers south of Tokyo, *Japan's one and only* Demon Sanctuary—a special self-governing district that manages demons such as yourself."

"*Manages*? Don't you mean *isolates*?" Kojou replied with sarcasm.

If the goal was merely to manage demons, going out of their way to construct a self-governing district at sea, far away from the mainland, would hardly have been necessary. He felt that the island's existence was clearly for shutting demons in and isolating them from human society.

The girl's emotionless eyes locked with Kojou's provoking stare.

Without warning, she thrust her right hand forward, which had previously been concealed in her coat.

She was holding a long, glowing vermilion sword in that hand. The serrated blade undulated like billowing flames. She positioned its tip against Kojou's neck.

"Who are you?" he asked, conscious of the blade's weight as it grazed his skin.

"My name is Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella," she answered with the utmost gravity.

"I am your watcher."



CHAPTER ONE
THE COLLEGE OF
MAGICAL ARTS

CHAPTER ONE

THE COLLEGE OF MAGICAL ARTS

1

The stench of the sea breeze was stagnant within the old building, seemingly an abandoned factory.

Rays of afternoon sunlight filtered through the broken windows, reflecting off the white dust hovering in the air.

It was a poorly lit passage in the shadow of a rusted steel pillar. Crouched down on the cracked concrete floor, the small-statured figure was surveying the situation around her. The girl's large eyes gave the impression of a mischievous kitten.

She was wearing a low-cut workout top and other sporty articles. Metal covered the back of her gloves, and her armored-toe, high-cut boots were oddly eye-catching. Most noticeable of all were the pointed, bestial ears sprouting from her head.

The girl's irises were wide, as if she was peering deep into the night. Her curly, chestnut-colored hair swayed with a flutter, and her ears twitched in surprise. She had detected the presence of an anomaly concealing itself on the other side of a wall in the building.

"Target acquired. Seems to be lurking in the next room over. Can you tell, Ruirui?"

Nodding at the girl's words was a boy on standby outside the abandoned factory. He had the air of an honors student, a subtle gentleness coming through his actions even while he peered through the scope of a sniper rifle.

"I've spotted it, too. That's Ms. Magatoki's Type Fourteen Armored Shikigami.

It walks on two feet and its max armor thickness is ninety millimeters. Whaddaya wanna do, Squad Leader? It's a pretty tough one."

"Yuno, any other bogeys in the area?" asked a third person listening to their radio exchange.

She was a white-haired girl clad in a coat with metal shoulder guards and a cobalt-blue wimple. Her name was Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella, a transfer student dispatched from a small country in southern Europe. She was a paladin-in-training and an expert in anti-demon combat.

"Mmm, doesn't seem to be any. None active, at least," Yuno said, quietly leaning out from the shadow behind the pillar, her animal ears twitching.

Yuno Amase was an L-type—a so-called beast person; her vision and hearing were tens of times sharper than those of a non-beast person's.

Shizuri smiled at the report. "*Bene*. Well then, let us launch a surprise attack before the target notices us. Yuno, keep the target occupied. Rui, cover fire, please. I shall approach and handle the direct strike."

"Roogger that!"

Yuno let her canine teeth poke out slightly in an aggressive smile. Her gloves made a creepy little squeak as she clenched her hands.

"Roger from me as well. I will prepare a ritual for slowing it down."

Rui Miyazumi, the boy with the sniper rifle, attached a slender torpedo-shaped cylinder to the gun's barrel. It was a military spell-fragmentation round, which deployed a ritual for capturing demon beasts from its point of impact.

Noticing that her squadmates had finished their preparations, Shizuri said, "I'll let Yuno decide the timing for when we begin our attack. Capiisce?"

"Gotcha," replied Yuno innocently.

In the midst of this was a fourth person, standing behind Shizuri. Bewildered, he nervously chimed in, "Wait a sec. What about me? What should I do...?"

"...Oh right, you're here, too, Kojou Akatsuki." Shizuri looked back at him, seeming to just remember him that moment.

Compared with Shizuri and the others' apparent familiarity with combat, the boy had zero defenses. He bore no weapons such as a gun or even a single piece of protective equipment. All he wore atop his standard-issue uniform was a gray military parka. He was also not very perceptive of his surroundings, standing wide-open like an amateur on the field of battle or a civilian who'd wandered into the fray.

"Your role is to support us. Please politely stand there, and do not get in the way."

"You make support sound easy, but what am I supposed to do, exactly?!"

Shizuri's cold dismissal left Kojou further at a loss. Unable to watch Kojou so conflicted, Rui narrowed his brows slightly as he maintained his sniping position.

"Kojou. Sorry. If your hands are free, I'd like you to buy some bread for me. This week, there should be *kinako* bread on a limited-time sale; so if you please."

"I'd like something to drink. Sweet, but not carbonated," Yuno added as she continued crawling ahead on all fours.

"R-right," Kojou muttered, nodding for a second before suddenly objecting, "Wait, that means I'm just your errand boy!"

That ain't what support means, y'know.

However, Yuno ignored Kojou's plea, crudely kicking off from the concrete floor.

Leaving behind an afterimage, her tiny body accelerated like a hunting dog that had picked up the scent of its prey.

Using the walls and steel girders in the factory, Yuno made small corrections to her trajectory as she sped toward a huge, solitary doll left in place.

It was about four meters in height. Covered in thick armor, it gave off the impression that it was less of a doll and more of a four-limbed tank. It bore no visible weapons, but the sheer size of the metal construct was plenty menacing in itself. The silver-colored knight statue sensed Yuno's approach and whirled to

life. In contrast to its weighty appearance, its movements were bizarrely smooth.

Even so, Yuno was undaunted. Making no effort to slow down, she approached the doll head-on, performing a somersault as she pounded a heel strike into its steel-helmeted cranium. Sustaining that single blow from the small-statured girl, it faintly wobbled.

“Let’s gooo! White Rabbit Kick Number Six: Falling Moon! And, from there—”

Using the recoil from the heel drop, Yuno vaulted into the air once more. The doll stretched an enormous arm right before her eyes. However, Yuno slipped past it with movements befitting a ninja. Then, she slammed both of her palms into the doll’s now wide-open chest.

“Lion King Fist Number Four: Clawed Star!”

As Yuno’s voice resonated, a heavy blow simultaneously penetrated the doll. Using the acceleration from her fall, the shift in the doll’s own center of gravity, and her own brute strength as a beast person, she launched a fresh attack. Heavily thrown off balance, the doll crashed through the building’s wall before hitting the ground and rolling onto its back.

“It’s in my line of fire. Yuno, stand back.”

“Roogger!”

Yuno evaded pieces of rubble flying in various directions as she retreated, putting distance between herself and the doll. As if to pursue her, the doll leaped back to its feet with unbelievable speed. It was then that the spell-fragmentation round from Rui flew in.

With a pale glow, its spell barrier deployed and enveloped the doll, becoming invisible chains that sealed the huge silver body’s movements.

“Shizurin, the rest is up to you!”

“As if it even needed to be said—!”

As Yuno left the field, Shizuri ran straight ahead to take her place. She was wielding a silver mace: a close-combat weapon with a meter-long metal flange at the tip. With Rui’s ritual spell having halted the doll’s movements, Shizuri

mercilessly swung her mace down toward its head. The blow triggered the fuse of the explosive inside the mace. A flash of light erupted along with a roar, and explosive flames engulfed the doll.

The ground seemed to ripple as it shook, the roof of the abandoned factory creaking from the blast winds.

Sparks and hot air blew even as far as the corridor where Kojou was standing.

Still surrounded by flames, the doll did not move. Its armor broke, fragments scattering apart as they became a shower of scrap metal.

“Well... ’Twas nothing, really.” Shizuri, lying on the ground to avoid the blast wind, held her flapping wimple down with a hand as she exhaled.

Having been in the thick of the explosion, she was, of course, not in tip-top condition.

Thanks to protective ritual spells, her body was unharmed, but the coat she had worn was torn and ripped, and even the clothing under it was singed. It was sad to see her pale white skin exposed from the gaps of her torn-up stockings.

Convinced the matter was taken care of—she had surely felt the doll fall to her blow—she tossed away the mace’s shaft, its tip having broken off even before the explosion. She then began touching up her disheveled clothes.

It was a fatal opening.

“Squad Leader, it’s not over! The doll’s magical energy hasn’t vanished!” Rui shouted as he loaded another spell-fragmentation round.

Giant footsteps echoed once more. Waving away the smoke lingering after the explosion, the enormous silver doll emerged right before Shizuri’s eyes.

“Wha—?! That shouldn’t be...!”

Shizuri threw herself at the ground and into a roll, just barely evading the doll’s colossal downswing. Its head, despite having taken an explosion point-blank, was largely unharmed. Only the silver helm was lost, exposing the chiseled face beneath.

It was a crude human face, seemingly made from glazed mud.

“It can’t be... This doll has scapegoat rituals inscribed on its armor...?!” Shizuri sharply bit her lip as she realized the reason behind her failed attack.

Charms, amulets, scape dolls—ritual spells on such things activated when the main body was attacked, transferring the damage to the item instead. It was a very common tactic with numerous variations.

This doll had such rituals inscribed on every piece of its armor, and thus had it withstood Shizuri’s attack. Like reactive armor on a tank, the scapegoat inscription had likely employed recoil and shattering spells to mute the blow of the explosion.

Once you understood it, the trick was simple. However, the simplicity of the trick was what had brought Shizuri to the brink of peril. Surely a doll, nothing more than an artificial construct, would never employ a scapegoat ritual—Shizuri was paying the price for that arbitrary assumption.

“Shizurin!!”

To support her fallen squadmate, Yuno went punching after the doll once more, but her mighty blow was only able to make the enormous silver body tremble slightly. She grunted, tapering her lips in chagrin as she evaded the doll’s counterattack and put distance between them.

It was too huge to destroy with brute strength, even from a beast person. They’d known that from the start. That was why Shizuri had resorted to the crude method of explosives. However, the mace had already been broken.

“Not good... This doll is a higher level than expected. We can’t engage it with our current equipment.” Rui fired a fresh spell-fragmentation round, but the doll’s movements were dulled only slightly. Unfortunately, the force of his sniper rifle was insufficient to inflict any further damage.

“We’ll pull back and regroup. Yuno, retreat ahead of us!”

“But, Shizurin, then you’ll be...!” Yuno opened her eyes wide at her friend’s plea.

Their opponent’s monolithic frame was far more agile than they had expected. Thanks to the earlier explosion, their escape route was buried under a pile of rubble. Unless someone served as a decoy, safe retreat was impossible.

“I can handle this much on my own with ease!”

A stout smile came over Shizuri’s lips as she drew the sword at her hip. It was beautiful, with a blade that resembled flickering flames, but Yuno didn’t think it could penetrate the thick armor covering the doll.

Shizuri boldly stood straight in front of it. She was drawing its attention so that Yuno might escape. Of course, Shizuri engaging in such action in the narrow confines of the abandoned factory exposed her to even more danger.

Kojou found himself sprinting forward before he could comprehend the situation.

“Huh?! Akatsuki...?!”

Rui was the first to notice Kojou’s unexpected move. Even he was not composed enough to hide being shaken by the newbie—so fresh they’d forgotten he even existed—charging toward the front line.

“Ah, Kojou Akatsuki?!”

“Kojikoji, what are you doing?!”

Shizuri and Yuno stopped moving when they realized Kojou was drawing near.

At that moment, Kojou was completely unarmed. He was not equipped with a weapon to penetrate a doll’s armor, let alone proper defensive gear. Even so, Kojou did not slow down. Vaulting over a collapsed wall, he approached the doll until he was forty to fifty meters away. If the doll detected his presence, it would surely hone in on him and attack across that distance in the span of a single second.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds!”

Standing still, Kojou raised his right arm overhead. Gushing out from his entire body was a torrent of demonic energy resembling a blast of wind. The incredibly oppressive power made the air shudder and made Shizuri’s cheeks go pale.

Kojou Akatsuki was the Fourth Primogenitor: the World’s Mightiest Vampire, served by twelve enormously powerful Beast Vassals.

And it was one of those Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, each said to rival a natural disaster, that Kojou summoned at that very moment.

“Please stop, Kojou Akatsuki!” Shizuri shrieked.

The doll slowly turned toward Kojou. Its creepy, monstrous gaze was reminiscent of that of a Grim Reaper as it studied Kojou’s wide-open body.

It was this silver doll at which Kojou glared, thrusting his right hand toward it.

“C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Five, Regulus Aurum!” Kojou howled, ferociously baring his fangs.

Demonic energy coalesced at a single point, adopting the form of an enormous, phantom beast—or so it seemed, when suddenly the space in front of Kojou’s eyes seemed to shimmer, twist, and distort.

A *poof* rang through the air as Kojou’s demonic energy dissipated.

All that was left was cold tranquility.

“Er... Huh...?!” With his right hand still dramatically thrust forward, Kojou cried out in bewilderment.

However, the fact that his Beast Vassal summons had misfired remained unchanged.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Shizuri angrily shouted at Kojou as he stood there astonished.

“Er, ah, that’s...”

Kojou subconsciously let his gaze wander all about as he stammered apologetically. As he did so, his field of vision abruptly darkened. Before he realized it, the steel doll’s huge frame had reached right in front of Kojou’s eyes and nose.

“Run! Quickly!”

“Huh?! ”

Shizuri’s shout set Kojou into motion, hastily turning his back toward the enemy.

But it was too late.

The doll's fist shot out with the force of a cannonball straight toward Kojou's back.

"U...uoooooooooo!"

Kojou's voice did not make it to the very end of his cry. His bones were broken, turning into a spray of fresh blood. It was over in an instant, leaving him with no time to even feel the pain.

"Ah... Kojou Akatsuki..."

The murmur trickled from Shizuri's lips, but there was no one left to respond to her call.

His flesh had been annihilated, ruined beyond the point of remaining in recognizable shape. Kojou Akatsuki was dead.

"No... noooooooooooooooooo—!"

Shizuri's roar echoed through the abandoned factory that reeked of blood.

The long sword Shizuri clenched in her hand wavered menacingly like a flame. Its undulating blade was enveloped by a vermilion glow. Shizuri's eyes were dyed crimson, and then... And then.....

2

The next time Kojou opened his eyes, he was lying on a hard, plywood sheet.

The scents lingering in the air were a mix of antiseptic and the sweet smell of shampoo.

As Kojou lay there, a girl was resting atop his chest, producing the soft sounds of sleep.

She'd probably fallen asleep at some point while sitting in the chair at the bedside. Hair as white as snow tumbled out from the gaps in the blue wimple on her head. Still unable to grasp the situation, Kojou hazily surveyed his surroundings.

It was a cramped, rather Spartan room. The bed was placed in the center of the room, with light-green curtains swaying over the windowsill. There was a

bottle of mineral water and a glass on top of the bedside table. Also, there were medical diagnostic devices he did not recognize.

When he looked harder, he saw a number of cords stretching from the diagnostic devices wrapped around his upper arm. It seemed that this was a hospital, and a very stereotypical medical facility at that.

It was still dark outside the window. He figured it was just after daybreak.

“I see... I...”

Recalling the scene immediately before he lost consciousness, Kojou let out a tired sigh. Kojou had died once-over from being punched by that Type Fourteen Armored *Shikigami* contraption.

The fact that Kojou’s body, squished by that mass of steel and torn to shreds, had recovered in such a brief period of time was no doubt due to the shocking regenerative ability possessed only by vampire primogenitors.

Though the stupid-sounding title of World’s Mightiest Vampire rang hollow to him, at the very least, he was forced to accept that the immortality part was indeed fact.

“Ah, Kojikoji, you’re awake?”

The door to Kojou’s patient room opened and Yuno entered, carrying a paper Post Exchange shopping bag.

Her wavy chestnut-colored hair was the same, but the bestial ears that should have been poking up from her head had vanished. She’d released her bestialization. Instead of the low-cut athletic outfit she had been wearing, she now wore a regulation school uniform.

“Guess that’s the World’s Mightiest Vampire for you. Incredible regenerative power, huh?”

“Normally you’d be totally dead... Ah, I suppose you were dead till just earlier.” Yuno smiled cheerfully, her voice completely sincere.

Rather than voice a single word of complaint at that, he settled for the single, pouty murmur of “Who’s Kojikoji supposed to be?” He sluggishly sat up, his bandage-covered torso coming into view. “Come to think of it, what about the

doll? What happened to that monster?”

“Shizurin beat it.” Yuno pointed to the girl still sleeping on the bed.

“Kasugaya... Cas did it all by herself?”

Kojou drew his brows together in surprise. At the very least, right up to the point Kojou expired, the doll should have had Shizuri backed into a corner. He didn’t think it was a situation that could be turned around that easily.

Rui entered shortly after Yuno. “That’s because Squad Leader’s Hauras is a magic sword that amplifies its power by consuming the demonic energy of opponents it slices—Gisella’s secret armament. No doll for mock combat is going to hold up against that.”

He had changed into a school uniform as well, but the impression he gave off was the same as during combat. Thanks to the glasses he only wore when he was reading, his honors-student vibe increased all the more.

“Magic blade... Well, it certainly looked like an expensive sword...”

“Yeah. That said, since she used it during a mock battle for combat evaluations, our team got docked major points and we’ll have to retake it. We’ll be writing self-reflection letters until nightfall today too, y’see.”

Slumping his shoulders with a pained smile, Rui put down the bundle of printouts he’d been carrying. They included apology letters for having used a secret armament without permission, reports related to accidents during training, request forms for reimbursement for hospitalization and injury treatment fees, and paper for handwritten self-reflection letters.

Apparently, these dozens of documents were all to be written up that day.

Rui seemed to have already finished writing some fraction of the documents thereof.

“Sorry... This being my fault and all,” Kojou said.

“Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t your fault you couldn’t use your Beast Vassal, Akatsuki.”

“I’m a bit disappointed, though,” Yuno said. “I kinda wanted to see what a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor looks like.”

They both smiled at his apology and shook their heads.

It had been about half a year since Kojou had joined their squad, and he felt like he'd done nothing but cause them trouble in all that time. He felt grateful that they still showed consideration to him as a fellow teammate even so.

"Ah, that's right. Give Squad Leader a word of thanks later," Rui said. "She's been glued to your side the whole time until you came back to life."

"...She was?" Kojou asked in suspicion.

Because Shizuri was so overly serious, Kojou thought she must have found him, the one holding the team back, rather annoying.

"Seemed like Shizurin was pretty down about it, you see. She said Kojikoji dying was her fault."

"That's...unexpected. Didn't think Cas was the sort of girl to have something like that on her mind."

In the first place, the cause and fault of Kojou dying rested solely with him ignoring her orders and racing out in front of the doll strictly on his own judgment. There was no reason whatsoever for Shizuri to feel responsible.

But when he saw she was sleeping right beside him on the bed, he realized the comment of Shizuri being glued to his side must have been true...

"...Who is this Cas of which you speak?" asked that very Shizuri softly, sounding a bit sleepy still. Apparently, she'd awakened at some point, listening quite intently to Kojou and the others' conversation.

"Are those the words one speaks to his savior, who gathered his scattered pieces of flesh and brought them all the way to the hospital?! Is this not exceptionally rude, you incompetent vampire?!"

"Er, but, you know, Kasugaya and Castiella are a mouthful, so..."

"That's Castiella! Cas-ti-ell-a!"

Bringing her face right before Kojou's eyes, Shizuri emphatically sounded out her own name so that Kojou wouldn't forget it. The bridge of her nose and her white skin broadcast her noble features. The eyelashes on the rims of her almond eyes were long, and her eyes were a deep blue, reminiscent of a

tropical sea.

If she could just keep quiet, she would be a delicate beauty, but with her elegant eyebrows raised and her white teeth bared, she resembled a small animal one never tired of looking at. Kojou felt he was dealing with a haughty, prideful cat.

“If it is so difficult to say, I do not mind if you call me Shizuri, Kojou Akatsuki—Sorry, Kojou,” she corrected herself, trying to speak more casually.

“Ah...er, that’s a little...”

“Are you dissatisfied about something?!” Shizuri exploded as her rare act of compromise went to waste.

Watching her squadmate, Yuno narrowed her eyes with amusement. “*Pffft*—”

“What is it, Yuno?”

“Ah. It’s nothing. Well, Kojikoji’s corpse was definitely pretty gross, with the bones and even the internal organs showing. Thanks to that, I’ll never be able to eat beef again.”

“Hey, cut that out.”

Yuno’s indiscreet comment made Kojou shudder. Yet, the twisting in Kojou’s stomach came out as a low growl. The word *beef* reaching his ears had provoked his empty stomach.

“You were dead until not long ago, and the first thing you want to do is eat?” Shizuri exhaled in visible exasperation, turning a scornful gaze his way.

“Oh, shut up. Coming back to life really burns through your stamina!” he retorted, cheek twitching.

As a matter of fact, Kojou hadn’t had a bite to eat since the previous morning. He would’ve been hungry even without his body draining his physical energy to restore his flesh.

“The school cafeteria should be open now. How about we grab a bite?” Rui suggested gently.

The hands of the clock placed in the patient room indicated that it would soon

be 7 AM. It was around time for the dorm students to rub the sleep out of their eyes, get up, and head to the cafeteria.

“Oh, okay. That’d be great.”

With a stretch of his back, Kojou pulled off his blanket.

That instant, he felt the oddly cool, liberating feeling of air against bare skin.

“Aaah!”



Opening her big, black eyes even wider, Yuno stared at Kojou's lower body with keen interest. Shizuri's facial expression froze, her entire body going stiff as a rock.

Noticing the girls' reactions, Koujou finally realized that he was completely naked. Thanks to the bandages wrapped around his entire body, it felt like he had been wearing clothes. Most likely, the clothes he'd been wearing at the time had been rendered unsalvageable the moment the doll pulverized his entire body.

"Wh...what do you think you're doing?! You incompetent vampire...!"

Shizuri, forced to look at Kojou's naked body up close, reflexively unleashed a mighty punch.

The next moment, Kojou, struck in an unguarded part, and Shizuri, touching that part with her bare hand, forgot all about being in a patient room as they screamed simultaneously.

3

'Twas a midsummer island—

On four sides, a small, volcanic island was surrounded by open water as far as the eye could see.

Spread in the center of the island was a mountainous region of bare rock, a sea of trees spread over the base.

This was Onrai Island. Its total population was approximately six thousand, about half of which was composed of demons and families thereof, or researchers of those demons. Onrai Island was a model city for the peaceful coexistence of man and Demonkind—Japan's one and only Demon Sanctuary.

"Oh... Nice view..."

Kojou let out his carefree impressions as he gazed down at the horizon from one of that island's hills.

The observation platform Kojou stood on was about seven hundred meters

above sea level. He could see a harbor, a shopping center, a town hall, and a tiny settlement centered on corporate and academic laboratories below.

At a place slightly removed from these stood an educational institution surrounded by tall walls.

This was the College of Magical Arts—"the College" for short—a comprehensive high-end educational organization for the sake of training Attack Mages. This was Kojou's current place of residence.

The time was barely past two PM. The tropical sun rays were powerful, but the ocean breeze felt comfortable.

Kojou was leisurely leaning against the guardrail as he took in the breathtaking sight from the top of the hill.

There was a voice behind Kojou, tinged with anger and apparent scorn.

"Just when I wonder where you've run off to... Kojou Akatsuki!!"

"Geh?! Cas...!"

"Who is this Cas?! And why are you taking an unauthorized break here?!" Shizuri jabbed a finger toward him, her demeanor matching her hostile tone. She wore an Attack Mage High instructor's gym suit.

She was somewhat out of breath. Kojou guessed she had run up the mountain road without taking a single break.

When morning classes at Attack Mage High were over, Shizuri had dragged Kojou all the way to the summit for outdoor running in the name of endurance training.

"I can't help it, geez! How am I supposed to keep up with a stamina nut like you?! And this was mostly climbing, not running! How many kilometers is it to the summit?!"

"Stamina nut...?! Don't you mean you're just weak?! To think you're called the World's Mightiest Vampire!"

"If you understand that then don't make a vampire run in the heat of the midday sun!!" Kojou yelled. He grumbled to himself, "You're gonna reduce your subordinate to ashes."

For a time, Shizuri glared at Kojou with pursed lips, but in the end, she lowered her shoulders with an air of resignation. “If we must rest, then we will do so. We shall take a break of ten minutes only.”

“O-okay.” He exhaled, both in surprise and relief at Shizuri making an easy concession for once.

Kojou had washed up on the shores of Onrai Island around half a year prior. It was Shizuri who had found him nearly drowned on the water’s edge, and she had saved him.

Ever since, she had monitored all Kojou’s conduct as his self-described watcher. Afterward, she had enrolled Kojou in Attack Mage High and put him in her own squad.

She had two reasons for keeping Kojou under observation.

The first was that Kojou had lost the vast majority of his memory prior to reaching Onrai Island. All he remembered was his name and the title of Fourth Primogenitor. As for how he had obtained the power of the World’s Mightiest Vampire and why he had collapsed on an Onrai Island beach—Kojou himself could not provide those answers.

Due to the vast demonic energy he possessed, the loss of his past and purpose made him a dangerous vampire. It was only natural to monitor him.

Shizuri had another reason to observe Kojou: She was a Gisella paladin. Even though she was still a squire, Shizuri had been granted the secret armament Hauras because she was the most powerful class of Attack Mage, capable of destroying even a vampire primogenitor.

If, in a worst-case scenario, Kojou were to run amok, Shizuri could surely put a stop to him. Supposedly, she had been granted approval to terminate Kojou should he run amok. Kojou couldn’t act high and mighty to a girl like that.

“Now that I think about it, does running and weight training even work for vampires? Doesn’t an immortal body also mean it doesn’t grow?” Kojou asked in a languid tone, facing Shizuri.

Meanwhile, she was continuing her stretches in earnest seriousness.

Even now, Shizuri was still wearing her wimple. At first, the clash between that serene headdress and an exercise T-shirt creeped him out, but now he couldn't raise a word of complaint.

Shizuri blinked with a slightly dubious air at Kojou's question.

"Certainly in the case of Old Guard vampires, their endurance does not rise from them honing their bodies."

"I knew it! Then isn't this completely pointless?!"

Kojou's expression was aghast as he looked back at the treacherous, arduous path they had been climbing.

Though Kojou did not exactly hate physical activity, he had no interest in mountain climbing, particularly once he'd judged such training meaningless.

However, Shizuri shook her head with a solemn expression. "No, what is important is the state of one's mind. If one's spirit is honed through training, this will add to your power as a Demon, affecting the body in turn."

"...You're saying my body will change to match my mental image?"

"Yes. Indeed, this is hardly limited to vampires. For those with a vulgar heart, it is indecent even to be looked at by them. Know this and repent," she murmured, staring squarely at the lower half of Kojou's body.

Her raw disgust caused Kojou's temple to visibly twitch.

"How long are you gonna hold a grudge about that?! In the first place, I'm the one who was exposed! I'm the victim here!"

"You are the one who made me look, are you not?!"

"It's not like I meant to! This is like saying, Kasugaya, your breasts are puny, so your heart is puny, too!"

"Th-they are not puny!"

Shizuri covered the chest of her T-shirt as her face grew beet-red.

Shizuri most certainly was not unstylish but compared with the equally small yet curvaceous Yuno, it was undeniable that her physique was relatively flat.

Shizuri's tone softened. "...Why did you do such a thing anyway?" She let out

a sigh.

“I told you it wasn’t on purpose.” Kojou grimaced. “Man, that’s rude.”

Shizuri shook her head. “I mean about the mock battle yesterday. Even though you can’t summon your Beast Vassals, you jumped right in front of that doll unarmed. You were basically saying, *Kill me, please*. Fatalities in combat training are unheard of.”

“Even I don’t know why I did it,” Kojou said roughly, avoiding her eyes. “It’s just, at the time, my body moved on its own. Probably figured I couldn’t just abandon you and leave you by yourself in a place like that.”

“To die for that accomplishes nothing,” she said bluntly, exasperated.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right about that. Just...” Cutting himself off, Kojou nodded with a guilty look on his face.

Certainly, his action would have seemed reckless to any third-party observer. But at the time, Kojou had been sure of it—sure that he could summon a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor and destroy that doll.

He did not know the reason his Beast Vassal summons had ended in a misfire. He didn’t think it simply failed. He’d felt an unpleasant resistance, like something had blocked it. It wasn’t that he’d lost the power; something had sealed the power away. He figured it probably had something to do with him losing his memory, too.

“Your memories prior to coming to this island have yet to return, correct?”

Shizuri, perhaps thinking along the same lines as Kojou, posed the question with tenderness.

“I can’t remember a thing,” said Kojou with a casual shake of his head. “I expected comin’ back to life after dyin’ once might change something, but...”

“How simplistic of you.” In an exaggerated motion, Shizuri put a hand over her eyes and sighed.

Oh shut up, thought Kojou, silently pursing his lips.

“Now that we have established the insufficiency of your power, let us recommence your training,” Shizuri spurred him on from behind.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said reluctantly.

They were about halfway up the road to the summit. Ahead, the air would grow thinner, and both road and incline would grow more precarious. It would be true hell from that point on.

“Kojou.”

Just when Kojou, wanting to get the training over with already, began climbing the sandy rock, Shizuri abruptly called him to a halt.

“What?” asked Kojou, warily looking back. For some reason, Shizuri was standing there with tension all over her reddened face.

“I will at least...express my appreciation for your feelings and intent to help me. *Grazie*... Th-thank you...”

Shizuri looked away from him. Kojou wasn’t used to this kind of behavior from her. While he stood bewildered, she suddenly overtook him, sprinting ahead as if to flee.

“Ah... Hey, wait, Cas! I don’t know how to get down from here on my own!”

“Who is this Cas of whom you speak?!”

As Kojou chased after Shizuri, she quickened her pace even more.

The sunlight shone upon that narrow mountain road as a pair of angry voices echoed for quite some time.

4

Splattered on top of the large plate were chicken wings stir-fried in garlic butter. Added to the dish were spicy mushrooms, potatoes, broccoli, and Caesar salad on the side. It was a dish cooked paella style.

“Deliiiiish!” Yuno let out a cry of exultation as she euphorically bit into a chicken wing.

They were on campus grounds. The Kasugaya Squad was quartered in an old-style house with an earthen hearth. By regulation, the students all lived at the College in quarters assigned on a per-squad basis.

The student cafeteria was only usable on weekdays at breakfast and lunch. All other meals were paid for and cooked by the students themselves. And as a result of a strict decision by the lottery system, it was Kojou's duty to cook for the Kasugaya Squad that day.

"Kojikoji, you're totally useless in combat training, but you get full marks on cooking! The skin's so ciiiispy, and the tender insides are so juicyyy... Super light on the soy flavoring for the meat, too."

"This cooking ain't anything complicated. I fried it after letting it sit in sauce overnight, that's all." He brought over some chilled barley tea and added quietly with a grimace, "And sorry for bein' useless."

Rui deftly stripped the meat from the bones. "It really is delicious, though. Where'd you learn to cook like this?" He clearly admired Kojou's culinary skills.

Kojou lightly shook his head without any particular thought. "Nah, it's nothing. I picked it up on the fly when I was helping Nagisa do it..."

"Nagisa? Who's that?"

"Huh?"

Rui's very natural question caused Kojou to lift his head in surprise. He'd subconsciously said the name aloud, but the instant he tried to remember who that person was, the memory grew hazy and vanished.

"Ah... Um, I'm not sure."

Perplexed, Kojou shook his head. Normally, he didn't give it any conscious thought, but from time to time, just like that, his amnesia was rubbed in his face, like it or not. Even the ring of the name *Nagisa* already felt like it concerned a complete stranger.

"Heh. Hmm, maybe Kojikoji's old flame? Really makes you think, huh, Shizurin?" Yuno shot an amused smile at their squad leader, trying to lighten the conversation.

Shizuri, who had been apathetically nibbling on her chicken wings up to that point, made a ferocious cough.

"Huhhh?! Me?! What for?! It is not something that concerns me whatsoever!"

“Heh... If you say so. I see. Shizurin doesn’t dwell on her boyfriend’s past...”

“Why are we talking about this?!” Shizuri shouted. “And what boyfriend?!” Her face was beet red.

Shizuri, having aimed to be a paladin in earnest from a young age, had built up no immunity to teasing about her love life.

“As a Paladin of Gisella, I am observing the Fourth Primogenitor—nothing more! If anything, I am watching vigilantly for the perfect opportunity to eliminate him!”

“Eliminate...?”

Still carrying teacups for the meal, Kojou winced at her choice of words. Of course, he understood Shizuri’s position, but her stark aggression was naturally hard to endure.

“No need to be so concerned,” Rui said, noticing Kojou’s stress. “It isn’t rare at all for demons with a danger-level rating above a six to be monitored in an isolated Demon Sanctuary like this. Though not many become targets for elimination...”

“And if you graduate with Attack Mage certification, you will be automatically removed as a target for observation,” Yuno added, mouth full of a chicken wing she’d grabbed.

“Graduate...,” murmured Kojou to himself.

The students of the College numbered some four hundred in total. Approximately 30 percent of that total had achieved apprentice Attack Mage status, such as Shizuri and Rui. The remainder were beast people, vampires, and other demons.

The student body comprised a large number of demons because obtaining Attack Mage certification granted demons the right to travel to the mainland. Put differently, until they formally became Attack Mages, demons were forbidden to leave Onrai Island. “A symbol of coexistence with humanity” sounded nice and all, but the Demon Sanctuary was, in actuality, a prison for demons.

And really, even though the College told Kojou he was an Attack Mage candidate, that simply wasn't true.

Half the reason Kojou had been forced to enroll was that they couldn't just let the Fourth Primogenitor walk around as he pleased.

Though in the first place, without any memories, Kojou neither had anywhere off the island to go to, nor acquaintances he might wish to meet. Perhaps that was the reason he couldn't take the Attack Mage High curriculum all that seriously.

"Miyazumi, what made you want to become an Attack Mage?" Kojou asked in all seriousness.

Rui was an ordinary human, and Kojou had heard both his parents were researchers. They had nothing to do with Attack Mages. Surely he could graduate normally without deliberately aiming for a perilous line of work like that of an Attack Mage.

"I had an interest in *Carceri* to begin with. The only way for a normal person to enter a *Carceri* is to become an Attack Mage. Hence, the College."

"The what?"

"They went over this in class any number of times. Or did you already forget?" Shizuri glared at Kojou, exhausted with him.

Kojou hastily shook his head. "Ah, er, I remember. I remember that. The forbidden grounds of Onrai Island, right?"

The areas known as *Carceri* were natural caverns under the jurisdiction of the College. Dense demonic energy filled the interior, which supposedly gave rise to numerous peculiar phenomena.

"It's just, I don't really get it. Why would there be a dungeon built right in the middle of these school grounds? I mean sure, it might be convenient for Attack Mage training, but..."

"You have it precisely backward." Her cheeks still stuffed with potato, Shizuri explained in a sober and serious tone. "The *Carceri* were not made for an educational institution. They existed in this land from the beginning. The

College, and the Demon Sanctuary itself, were built in order to keep the *Carceri* sealed.”

“Ah, okay.” It made perfect sense to build a facility to seal a dangerous place and use that place to train the people needed to keep it that way. “So there’s monsters roaming around the *Carceri*?”

It really does feel like a dungeon in a video game, Kojou thought.

Rui made a pained smile as he nodded. “The Debris, yes. You’ll meet them in combat exercises, like it or not.”

“Gotcha...”

“Don’t die next time, Kojikoji. Debris are a lot tougher than the *Shikigami* from yesterday,” Yuno said, poking at a sore spot for him.

“Not like I died ’cause I wanted to, sheesh.” He grimaced.

Yuno broke into giggles, but a serious expression abruptly turned serious. “Come to think of it, have you heard about the rumor that a ghost turned up in the *Carceri*?”

“...A ghost?” His expression was tired. “That’s no big deal.”

It was an underground labyrinth monsters came out of. He didn’t think a ghost or two were worth anyone getting excited about.

However, Yuno lowered her voice, as if telling a scary story. “Well, it seems to be a ghost of this really pretty girl. Last week, a boy from Squad Four ran across her staring right at him from inside the darkness with this really sad face. She said, *Not here*, and vanished, apparently.”

“The hell...? Man, that’s creepy.”

Kojou shuddered faintly. Setting aside undead that possessed no intelligence, a spirit that was bound to the earth but was also connected to the modern era, made it a genre Kojou had real trouble with. Separate from any actual danger such a thing might pose, he didn’t have a very good feeling about encountering a ghost while patrolling the labyrinth.

“That’s so stupid. He must have seen it in a dream. If not that, then he just made it up,” Shizuri interrupted.

Yuno made a leering grin.

“Ah, Shizurin, are you nervous? Could it be you’re afraid of ghosts?”

“I am n-not nervous whatsoever!! If you do not believe me, I would be happy to head into the labyrinth right this minute to prove it!”

Shizuri stood up, looking pale, but she had a hand on the hilt of “Hauras,” which rested nearby.

Yuno, with a sparkle in her eyes, exclaimed, “Ah, Shizurin, behind you!!”

“Nyaah?! Nyaaaah?!”

Fear ran through Shizuri as she whirled around and let out a shriek, waving around her beloved flaming blade all the while.

Kojou instantly hit the floor to avoid being caught up in her attack and looked up at Shizuri with tears in his eyes. “Give me a break,” he muttered, making a quiet sigh.

5

Kojou waited right until lights-out before slipping out of his own room.

Stepping into his sandals, he exited the old-style house that constituted their quarters.

With nothing to obstruct the midsummer sky, stars glittered above. Lacking streetlights, the path was dark, but being a vampire, Kojou could see just fine. He walked up the narrow, unpaved hill road with a hum, and when he had just about reached the top, he noticed a slender silhouette. It was a girl with white hair wearing a wimple.

“Huh? Cas?” Kojou suddenly called out.

“There is no one named Cas here!” Shizuri whirled around, shoulders trembling.

Wearing a reddish-brown shirt, she had been standing still at the entrance to a grove devoid of human presence, seemingly at a loss.

“What are you doin’ in a place like this?”

“N-nothing whatsoever. I had business with the post office,” Shizuri replied, her right hand gripping a white cylinder, unadorned save for an address written on it in some foreign language. He figured it was addressed to her family living somewhere overseas.

“And just where did you think you were going?” she asked.

“Figured I’d go buy something to drink.” Kojou pointed toward a school building in the distance.

For cultural reasons, Onrai Island had no 24-7 convenience stores or similar facilities. But vending machines situated on school grounds were like oases to students at night.

“My throat felt a little dry. Might’ve overdone the chicken wing seasoning a bit.”

“O-oh, I see. In that case, since I happened to be heading to the post office, I shall accompany you!” Her voice took on an oddly enthusiastic tone.

Kojou looked back at the expression of relief on Shizuri’s face and fixed a suspicious stare at her. It wasn’t technically wrong to say she *happened* to be on her way, but the post office and the vending machines were in practically opposite directions. It had to be a rather large detour for her.

And why had Shizuri been standing idly in a place like that to begin with?

“Cas, don’t tell me you were...afraid of going to the post office by yourself after listening to Amase’s ghost story...?”

“Wh-what kind of stupidity are you speaking?! It is utterly impossible for a paladin such as me to be afraid of a made-up story like that! As the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, I am merely—”

“I get it! I get it already, so don’t shout it out loud at night. You’ll bother the neighbors!”

“Th-this is because you made an assertion so far off the mark!”

The reason for Shizuri’s nervousness was clear; she desperately continued making up excuses. That said, in the dead of night, the briar-infested forest

surrounding Attack Mage High's school grounds was actually quite creepy. Even Kojou, a vampire, could pick up on that, so he could certainly understand Shizuri feeling frightened.

"Come to think of it, you wear that thing even late at night, huh?"

As they were plodding down the gravel road within the forest, Shizuri grasped the hem of Kojou's T-shirt as they walked, seeming a little sullen as she pressed a hand to her wimple.

"Is that a complaint concerning my attire?"

"Not really, but doesn't it clash with a jersey? Looks kinda stuffy."

"It is none of your business. This wimple identified me as a paladin, after all."

"Okay. Seems a bit of a waste to me, since your hair's so pretty and all."

"Huh?"

Kojou's nonchalant comment made Shizuri open her eyes wide in surprise.

"My hair is...pretty...?"

"Well, yeah, I think so. Oh...if that bothers you, I'm sorry."

"N-no... It does not particularly bother me..." Shizuri's voice was so quiet. She lowered her eyes. Her expression said, *I do not know how to react to that.*

In the next moment, she violently collided with Kojou's back, letting out a *Nyah!*-like shriek.

"Wh-what is the big idea?! Why did you suddenly stop?!"

She pressed a hand against her reddened nose, glaring at Kojou. However, he gave no reply at all, his attention completely focused on the bizarre scenery displayed in a corner of his vision.

He was looking at the corner of the track and field grounds late at night. There stood an old wooden school building that doubled as a training facility. The College's school grounds had a number of abandoned buildings like this that served as stages for mock battles.

That school building was blanketed with dazzling light. Mysterious, violet flames filled the school building, gushing out from the building's foundation. It

was creepy.

The violet flames leaked out from the gaps in the windows, suddenly enveloping the entirety of the structure.

“What the heck is that...?!” Kojou murmured in astonishment.

The ground shook with a roar. Unable to withstand the pressure from the flames, the walls of the school building flew apart.

Amid the falling beams and debris from the crumbling roof, the violet flames swirled in a vortex, finally transforming into an enormous monster.

“That’s not...someone who stayed behind to study until this hour of the night, right...?” Kojou asked casually.

“Of course not!” Shizuri’s voice went shrill. “I do not know about the much-rumored Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, but even the instructors at Attack Mage High cannot wield spells that would blast an entire school building apart!”

“Then what the hell is that monster?!” Kojou bared his teeth in annoyance as he replied.

The violet monster kicking remnants of the school building away had an eerie form that was neither beast nor insect. It resembled a vampiric Beast Vassal, but it was far larger and exceedingly violent. Furthermore, unlike Beast Vassals, it had no vampire to act as its host, making it an uncontrollable monster.

“It is...a Debris,” Shizuri murmured weakly, seeming to wring her own voice out of her.

Kojou gasped, drawing in his breath. “That’s a Debris? Don’t they only appear deep in the *Carceri*? How did one come out on the surface?”

“I do not know! However, at this rate, the town will be in danger—!”

“The town...?! ”

Because her back seemed to be against a wall, Shizuri’s words made Kojou finally grasp the gravity of the situation.

The violet-colored monster had emerged from the corner of the College’s

school grounds. If it climbed over the six-meter-high wall, what rested ahead was the town in which Onrai Island's civilian populace dwelled.

The walls surrounding the College had barriers spread across them to prevent intrusion, but he didn't think the barriers could withstand this monster's offensive power.

"Kasugaya...can your magic sword take that thing down?"

"Magic sword? Are you referring to Hauras?" she asked. After a brief silence, she nodded. "Yes. A Debris is a mass of demonic energy, therefore Hauras can most certainly destroy one."

"Got it. Then go back to the quarters right now to get it."

"What do you intend to do?"

Shizuri looked at the side of his glaring face with concern.

Kojou listlessly shrugged and gave a heavy sigh. "Can't let that monster off campus, can we? Someone's gotta grab its attention."

"You can't...possibly mean facing a Debris all by yourself?!" She gaped at him.

"Nah," Kojou said, shaking his head. "It's on such a huge rampage that other students and instructors should notice right away and come running... probably."

To Shizuri, he sounded utterly irresponsible. She stepped closer.

"But...!"

"Hey, I'm the World's Mightiest Vampire. No need to worry. We proved yesterday that I'll come back even if I'm torn to shreds, right?"

"H-how much of an idiot are you?! Just because your body has returned from death once or twice does not guarantee you will come back if a Debris eats you!"

"That doesn't mean I can abandon the people of this island, dammit!"

Shizuri's voice caught in her throat. Kojou was the immortal Fourth Primogenitor and a student of Attack Mage High. Between Kojou's safety and the lives of civilians, it was crystal clear which ought to come first.

“So go get that sword quick, 'kay? I'll buy as much time as I can till then.”

A rash smile came over Kojou's face as he turned toward the Debris once more.

“I ask that you do not forget those words!”

Shizuri turned around and raced in the direction of the old house that was their quarters.

“Leave it to me.”

He had no basis for those words, but he approached the Debris nonetheless.

The flame-engulfed school building was about four hundred meters away. Even at that distance, Kojou could keenly feel the Debris's demonic energy cast around indiscriminately. It was not an opponent an incomplete vampire, unable to even summon his Beast Vassals, could properly fight.

“So the only option is to grab its attention and run for it, huh...?”

Feeling half-despondent, Kojou unleashed his own demonic energy. In the half year since he'd arrived at Attack Mage High, even he had learned a minimal level of control of his demonic energy.

That didn't mean he could make use of any proper magic, but it should have been plenty to provoke a Debris. And yet...

“Wha...?!”

The Debris's oversized head swiveled in Kojou and Shizuri's direction. Then, it did something Kojou never expected.

Its entire body changed into a violet beam, and the Debris...leaped.

Not toward Kojou but toward Shizuri as she hurried back to their quarters—

“That's crazy! Why is it aiming for Cas—?!”

Kojou spun around, aghast. The Debris-turned-beam mowed down the trees and chewed up the ground's surface as it chased Shizuri. Kojou had no way to stop it.

“Cas, dodge!”

“Huh?!”

Shizuri, sensing a strange aura, came to a stop before Kojou’s shout could reach her. As she did so, the Debris, transforming into a beast once more, slammed an enormous foreleg into her.

“Cas—!!”

Kojou screamed, his face twisting in despair. A single blow from the monster had been able to instantly blow a school building apart. With Shizuri defenseless, there was no way she could endure such a blow.

“Ah...”

However, the violet flames brightened and Kojou saw Shizuri in the middle of them, standing rooted to the spot in a daze, her eyes wide. Enveloped by the purple flames, she stood there, unharmed.

It was a diminutive figure who had sliced the Debris’s attack apart, saving Shizuri—

A black-haired girl wielding a silver-colored spear.

She possessed a divine beauty, but at the same time, it was terribly frightening. This was an existence that was not of that world.

Impaled by the girl’s spear, the Debris dissipated, leaving pure-white particles of light behind.

The girl’s eyes gazed at Kojou through the purple burning flames that remained.

“I’ve finally...found you...”

The girl’s lips wove words with something that was not a proper voice. For no reason he could fathom, Kojou was ferociously unnerved by those words.

He did not recognize the uniform. He did not recognize the girl. Yet, for some reason, the girl’s presence felt so terribly familiar to him.

“Who...”

...are you? Kojou tried to ask in response, but the instant he tried to do so, the girl’s contours crudely twisted.

Turning hazy like mist, the girl melted into thin air and vanished.

“.....”

Leaving a brief final murmur behind, she completely vanished from sight.

All that remained were the still-burning remnants of the school building and the forest trees destroyed by the Debris, as well as Kojou and Shizuri.

“You alive, Cas?” Kojou asked his dazed squadmate. He slumped his shoulders. *Geez.*

Even though Shizuri’s shoulders trembled slightly, her breathing was normal. She nodded with confidence.

“Yes, I am indeed. However, who was that girl just now...?”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s the ghost Amase talked about?” he joked.

A Debris that should never have appeared on the surface had done exactly that and been defeated by a girl who should not have existed. Plus, the Debris had tried to attack Shizuri. It was all so confusing.

If there was one saving grace, it was that Shizuri was safe and sound.

She coldly looked up at Kojou, asking without emotion, “Kojou, do you... Do you know that girl?”

“Nah.” He shook his head and closed his eyes.

I don’t get it.

He didn’t recognize the uniform. He didn’t recognize the girl. Yet, that faint, almost illusory voice stayed in Kojou’s ears.

What stirred in Kojou’s chest was that voice, one he shouldn’t have been able to hear.

Without a doubt, she had called out to Kojou just before completely vanishing.

It was a familiar voice; one he could never forget.

“Senpai,” she had said.

Intermission I

Raindrops dotted the boy's cheeks. It was the warm rain peculiar to tropical countries.

A strong sea breeze was blowing, causing the mangrove trees to sway.

The surface of the sea resembled the total darkness of night against the bone-white sandy beach. Collapsed on the outskirts was a boy with an average face wearing a military-gray parka.

His uniform was scratched and torn all over. The dark red spots on it were surely signs of recent bleeding.

However, under the fabric, the boy's body had no wounds visible to the naked eye. It was as if he'd just finished regenerating, and he now had new skin.

"U...gggh..."

Then he let out a ferocious cough and violently vomited up sea water.

Displayed in his teary vision was a lonely, unfamiliar island. The force of the continued downpour increased, making the boy's face twist with terror.

He didn't know why he was in such a place nor did he know his own identity.

Abruptly, without any underlying thought, the boy shifted his gaze toward the cape. It was as if he'd known what was about to happen from the very beginning.

"I have finally found you, Kojou Akatsuki."

He heard a girl's voice over the sound of footsteps on drenched sand. The voice had a cold tone full of caution.

Opening his eyes wider, he beheld a delicate silhouette. It was a young girl dressed in a hat that made her seem part nun, part knight.

Her faintly blue, large eyes stood out among her features. Even in his night vision, the color of the hair poking out through the gaps of her wimple was vividly white.

“...Kojou...Akatsuki?”

As the girl’s eyes coldly looked down at him, the boy turned to her, perplexed. He could not immediately grasp that she was saying his name.

“Do you not remember? That is your name, is it not? Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki?”

The girl’s brows glowered at him with a measure of irritation.

“I’m...the Fourth...Primogenitor?”

“Yes. You are the fourth of the original vampires, which should not exist. You are immortal and immutable. You have no brethren by blood, order is not among your desires, and you are served by twelve Beast Vassals that are destruction incarnate. You drink people’s blood, thereby slaughtering and destroying them. You are a cold, heartless monster astray from all doctrines of the world—that is what you are, Kojou Akatsuki.”

“So, I’m a vampire primogenitor, huh...?”

Still resting upon the sand, the boy gazed at his own palms. Deep in the back of his mind, he had the strange sense that his supposedly interrupted memories were continuing once more.

“Do you remember now?”

The white-haired girl asked in a cold, standoffish tone. “Yeah,” said the boy, tossing a smile toward her.

He was not shaken. But something resembling unease ate away at him. He was irritated by the fear that he’d forgotten something important to him—something terribly crucial...

“Who are you?”

The words left his lips without much thought. His head was reeling, as if a powerful dizziness was overtaking him. He felt like he’d done this before.

Yes—Kojou knew the answer. He knew the name of the white-haired paladin upon which the transparent rain droplets fell.

“My name is Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella—”

The tip of the unsheathed sword in the girl's hand touched Kojou's neck, pulled toward it like a magnet.

It was a vermilion long sword that gently billowed like a flame. The blade of Gisella's secret armament, Hauras, consumed the demonic energy of the opponents it sliced.

"I am your watcher."

Her tone was severe. Her long sword remained pressed against Kojou's neck.

Kojou silently closed his eyes. Like déjà vu, the girl's words echoed in his mind over and over.

However, as if erased by the sound of the rain, that faint sense promptly vanished.

"...Gimme a break."

Kojou's barely audible murmur vanished into the predawn sky.



CHAPTER TWO
BEASTS OF THE
DUNGEON

CHAPTER TWO

BEASTS OF THE DUNGEON

1

On the beach, with the powerful rays of the sun pouring down, a Japanese-style parasol cast a thick shadow.

Placed directly under the parasol was a rattan-weave, expensive-looking summer bed. Elegantly lying atop it was a young woman in a bathing suit.

Her hair was dirty blond; in addition to being brushed haphazardly, it had an odd gradient beginning close to the roots. She wasn't ugly, but she wasn't the kind of beauty who could turn heads, either. Thanks to her lips being stretched in a thin smile, she somehow came off as mischievous.

On the other hand, her body was top-tier. Her torso was well-proportioned, and her breasts were bountiful, and clad in a bold, tricolor bikini that grabbed attention. Were it not for the white gown she wore draped over her shoulders, surely no one would believe that she was an instructor from the College.

Kako Magatoki was her name.

She was responsible for overseeing Federal Onrai Island College of Magical Arts's Squad Fourteen—aka the Kasugaya Squad.

"Pardon me."

Speaking to her in an overly serious tone was Shizuri Kasugaya, dressed in her school uniform. Kako briskly lowered the large sunglasses that covered half her face, looking back as Shizuri stood at attention.

"Ah, it's you. Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella. Still wearing that stuffy-looking wimple, I see. Why don't you change into a swimsuit, too? I have one that is quite appropriate for you right here..."

“I am fine. School is still in session, after all.”

“A pity.”

Kako was truly dejected as she stuffed a white micro-bikini with tiny strings back into her gown pocket. Wondering how that swimsuit could be described as *appropriate*, Shizuri was stricken with the urge to follow up with her assigned instructor.

She buried that urge deep down, though. Instead she asked stiffly, “Instructor Magatoki, could you give me a little of your time?”

“Ah, I don’t mind. I would be happy to. What is on your mind?”

“This concerns the incident at Training Structure Eight last night. I believe I sent you a report.”

“Training Structure Eight... Ah, you mean *that*.”

Kako put a hand on the tropical cocktail on her side table and took a sip. Shizuri grimaced at the faint whiff of alcohol hovering in the air. However, she spoke not a single word of complaint, because she acknowledged Kako’s skill.

In spite of her insufficient seriousness and level of diligence, Kako’s might as a magic user was far ahead of the norm. Even among their illustrious instructors, surely none would object that she was the strongest among them.

It was Kako who had prophesied that the amnesiac Kojou Akatsuki would wash up on Onrai Island and she who had ordered Shizuri to recover and observe him. The fact that Kako had nominated herself as Kojou’s assigned instructor was not unrelated to the acceptance of his enrollment into the College.

“I have read your report, of course,” Kako said bluntly, still holding the cocktail glass.

“Initially, I found it difficult to believe a Debris had appeared on the surface... and that you were saved by a spirit girl, doubly so.”

“But...!”

Kako put a stop to Shizuri’s nervous rebuttal with a light lift of her hand. “I am not doubting your report. We, too, had ascertained that rumors of a spirit were

spreading among the student body. And at the very least, the training building has very much been destroyed.”

“Sí...”

Shizuri reluctantly nodded and backed down. For some reason, Kako smiled at that.

“Besides, no student currently exists on campus that could employ sorcery with that level of destructiveness. Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella—this includes you. Am I mistaken?”

“That’s correct.”

I suppose she’s right, thought Shizuri. Even if it was a weathered wooden structure, it was still a school building, its size and stoutness incomparably beyond that of the average civilian structure. It was effectively impossible for a single human caster to employ a spell to send it flying with a single blow. Of course that went for vampires and beast people as well.

Yes, under normal vampires at least—

“The single exception is Kojou Akatsuki, then? I would think the power of a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor could blow one or two school buildings away with ease.”

“K-Kojou Akatsuki is not the culprit!” Shizuri shouted on reflex.

Kako chuckled, narrowing her eyes in even further amusement. Shizuri’s face reddened as she shook her head.

“Ah... In other words,” Shizuri clarified, “he was under my observation at the time the Debris appeared. In the first place, he is incapable of summoning Beast Vassals in his current state.”

“I trust you, Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella.”

Returning the cocktail glass to the table, Kako slowly sat up. Shizuri couldn’t help noticing how the way Kako moved exaggerated her bountiful cleavage.

“However, according to the report, the incident occurred rather late at night. Just what were you and Kojou Akatsuki doing together?”

“Huh...?”

The weight of the implication behind Shizuri’s assigned instructor’s question made her blink her eyes. Kako leered, a malicious smile coming over her as she gazed at Shizuri with deep interest.

“The vicinity of the school building where the incident took place was a dark, quiet place away from prying eyes.”

Once she understood the question behind the question, Shizuri blurted a “Wha—?” After a moment, she continued. “I...I merely accompanied Kojou Akatsuki as his watcher. There was absolutely no indecent—”

“No, no, I admire your dedication to your mission. It is not as if I suspected that there was some kind of...improper behavior between the two of you.”

“Of course there wasn’t!!” Shizuri’s face turned bright red. Because she was raised in a girls-only environment as a paladin, Shizuri’s resistance to this kind of humor was particularly lacking.

Kako, seeing just how nervously Shizuri was flailing about, made a pleasant sound in her throat as she smiled. “Very well. To you, so faithful in her mission, I am assigning homework.”

“Homework...you say?”

With Kako finally speaking in an instructor-like manner, Shizuri looked back at her with suspicion.

“Your make-up test for the combat exercise the other day is yet to be completed. This is a substitute.”

Kako sounded entirely sensible. *The other day* no doubt referred to the mock battle in which Kojou had died. Thanks to Shizuri thoughtlessly employing the secret armament Hauras against regulations, the result had not been recognized as counting toward their coursework.

Shizuri’s anxiety spiked. “Yes. However, what do you mean by home—?”

Kako lazily rested her cheek against her hand, smiling amiably as she spoke. “Exploring the *Carceri*.”

“Eh?! ”

Shizuri's eyes bulged.

"Please, wait. Our squad is not ready for the *Carceri*."

"How modest of you. Yuno Amase's capabilities as a scout are A-rank. In close combat, her might is ranked fourth in the entire school. Rui Miyazumi has inherited Jukou Miyazumi's place as the school's foremost prodigy. Including his time in middle school, he is already a veteran with over twelve explorations of the *Carceri* under his belt."

Kako counted the reasons on her fingers as she went.

"With a paladin bearing a secret armament added to the mix, one can only think of the squad's might as among the top five of our entire school."

"O-our squad has Kojou Akatsuki in it. As an Attack Mage, he is still no better than an amateur!"

"Heh. Concerned about the vampire you are assigned to observe, are you?"

"E-even if he is no more than my observation target, he is currently a member of my squad!"

Kako's teasing question drew an instant rebuttal from Shizuri, despite how awkward it might have been.

"Ah, such team spirit," said Kako in an exaggerated show of praise. "You need not be concerned. He won't die."

"Because he is the Fourth Primogenitor?"

"Well, yes. There is that, too."

Kako's reply was vague. Shizuri, too, was now acutely aware of the abnormal regenerative ability that made people speak of immortal vampire primogenitors as immutable. Even crushed by a doll and reduced to tattered pieces of flesh, Kojou had demonstrated he would easily recover within a single day. Of course, normal humans could do no such thing, but the feat was beyond even Old Guard vampires. The terrifying sight truly deserved to be called a curse by the gods themselves.

"He is the World's Mightiest Vampire. By rights, he would be able to take the top spot from anyone at this school," Kako said with a grin. "Although, at

present, Kojou Akatsuki has no memory of his past. He cannot even properly draw upon the least of his abilities as a vampire.”

“That is all the more reason to change the scenery, then. Do you not think giving him fresh stimulus is necessary? Solely to help him regain his memory, of course.”

“You might be right about that...”

Unable to find any basis to refute the words, Shizuri’s voice lost its vigor.

It had already been half a year since Shizuri had encountered Kojou Akatsuki on the shores of Onrai Island. She still knew little about him. Kojou Akatsuki lacked even knowledge about ritual spells and demons; infuriatingly, he did not even understand how he had become a vampire primogenitor.

Even if she continued to observe him, would Kojou’s memories ever come back? It was not just once or twice that Shizuri herself had felt such doubts.

Kako nodded coolly and lowered her voice. “Now that I think about it, given his true nature, this is an exceptionally good opportunity. If *that Kojou Akatsuki* is the true Fourth Primogenitor, invading the *Carceri* might well bring his true self to the fore. If, as a result, you judge that his existence is a menace to the world—”

“In that moment, I shall strike him down.” Shizuri did not hesitate.

Kako narrowed her eyes, amused. “Yes, that is your mission, isn’t it? However, can you really do that?”

“A foolish question. I am the paladin to whom Gisella has granted Hauras.” Shizuri touched the hilt of her sword with her hand.

Hauras, which increased its might by consuming the demonic energy of whatever opponent it struck, was likely the sole weapon able to destroy a vampire primogenitor. Having inherited this weapon, Shizuri had a duty to use it to slaughter dangerous demons...even if the opponent was one of her squadmates.

“Good answer.” Kako let out her breath with what seemed like a smile. “I will be in touch with details of the homework assignment. Ensure you finish

preparations to enter the *Carceri* before the day is out.”

“Understood.”

Politely, with a sober look on her face, Shizuri did an about-face and walked off.

Waiting for her student’s figure to disappear, Kako lifted a palm into the air. What hovered before her eyes was a translucent screen. Displayed on this screen were multiple photos from the report Shizuri had written. They were photos of the destroyed school building and the Debris giving off a mysterious light. And there was a photo of a girl wearing a uniform to which she was not accustomed.

“Snowdrift Wolf... So, the wielder of that accursed spear has revealed herself... Sooner than I thought, too...”

The sight of the indistinct, almost illusory girl made Kako curl up only the corners of her mouth. For but a single moment, a peculiar expression came over her, a mixture of palpable anger and scorn.

“Proceed with your futile struggling all you like. Just don’t get in the way of my work.”

A hateful chuckle trickled out over the beach, which was illuminated by dazzling sun rays.

Finally, with a violent gesture akin to crushing something in her hand, Kako dismissed the screen she had summoned.

2

“Common ritual tablets, Instant Wisps, flash rounds, grenades, plastic explosives, detonators...”

Inside a dimly lit building resembling a warehouse, Shizuri’s voice echoed as she read from a list.

It was an oddly constructed store reminiscent of an arms dealer or a mafia armory. It had narrow, dimly lit corridors on both sides, with a single wall

converted into an enormous shelf and merchandise stacked up nearly as high as the ceiling.

The merchandise on display ranged from ominous-looking weapon ammunition, to special catalysts used for ritual spells, to even daily necessities, clothing, and food. Attack Mage High's Post Exchange came furnished with everything required for day-to-day life.

"Knife, rope, carabiners, pegs, map, compass, emergency kits, communicators."

"....."

Kojou did as Shizuri ordered and tossed the supplies into the cart one by one. Their initial cart was already full, and even the second was being packed to the brim.

The pair had visited the PX with the goal of provisioning supplies for the *Carceri* exercise waiting for them the next day. Customarily, exploration of the enormous *Carceri* interior was conducted over the course of several days, which necessitated a considerable quantity of supplies. Not only were spare weapons in case of prolonged combat necessary, but food, drinking water, and equipment for camping in the field were as well. All that said, increasing the amount of supplies without a plan would lower your mobility from the sheer weight of it all. Exhausting your strength from what you were carrying was foolish beyond words. The gear one took to a *Carceri* exercise needed to be a precisely calculated balance between quantity and quality.

Even so, Shizuri's hand did not stop flipping through the list.

"Field rations, drinking water, handkerchiefs, toilet paper, facecloths, towels."

"....."

"Tea biscuits, bananas, throat lozenges, kettle, cups, teapot..."

"Daaaaaaaah—!!"

Interrupting his search for supplies, Kojou raised a loud voice. Kojou's bizarre action, made without a single shred of warning, made Shizuri's eyes go round in shock.

“Wh-what is this all of a sudden?!”

“This is way too much, dammit! I’m supposed to carry all this by myself?!”

Kojou wailed as he pointed at the cart brimming with merchandise. Shizuri nodded like the answer was obvious.

“That is the plan, yes. Yuno and I are on the front line, so we can hardly fight while carrying supplies. Miyazumi will no doubt have his hands full with his own gear. Having you, someone utterly useless from a combat perspective, carry everyone’s supplies is a natural and logical conclusion.”

“I ain’t complainin’ about being assigned to carry the luggage! But there’s still a limit, dammit! This is over sixty kilograms altogether, right? Any more and it’ll be heavier than you are!”

“A-any more or not, my body weight is less than sixty kilograms!”

“With your clothes and sword and stuff on, it probably goes way over that!”

“N-no, it does not!”

Kojou shook his head in irritation. He didn’t understand why she was so annoyed with him.

“Well, something like that isn’t really important. I’m telling you to lighten the load!”

““S-something like that’?! Not important...?!”

“I mean, why the individual list entries for tea biscuits and bananas and throat lozenges anyway?! And why do you need teapots and cups?!”

“Do you not know? They are tools required for the pouring of tea.” Shizuri touched a hand to her cheek, scornfully looking down on Kojou.

“I wasn’t askin’ about that,” he grumbled to himself. “Why do we need to carry stuff like that into a *Carceri*?! Make do with water!”

“That is inconceivable. Even during operational maneuvers, one must treasure the time one has to take a break.”

“The hell?! You some kind of aristocrat?!” Kojou drew in a sharp breath, ready to lodge further complaints at his unyielding team leader. However...

“Get down!”

...with a violent shove from Shizuri, Kojou tumbled onto the hard floor.

“Wh-what the?!”

“Shh! Be silent!”

When Kojou tried to sit up, Shizuri forced his head back down. She was looking outside the window of the PX—toward the meal space right outside. Kojou didn’t immediately recognize the pair of students, who were sitting on an unobtrusive bench hiding in the shadow of a tree. There was a boy and a girl, both small in stature.

“That’s...Amase and Miyazumi?”

“...So it would seem.”

Having confirmed that the two were their fellow squad members, Kojou and Shizuri turned to each other.

One was a chestnut-haired girl with an amiable face; the other was a boy with the refined looks of an honors student. They were definitely Yuno and Rui. The two were sitting shoulder to shoulder, casually enjoying cones of soft-serve.

Of course, there was no problem at all with how the two were acting. Since it was the day before the *Carceri* exercise, the Kasugaya Squad was exempted from classes. If their preparations for the exercise were complete, they were free to do as they wished thereafter...providing it did not offend public order and morals, of course.

“...?!”

Rui wiped away some ice cream on Yuno’s face with the tip of his own finger. Yuno put her mouth to it and licked, finger and all. Witnessing the episode to its end, Shizuri drew in her breath, shoulders trembling in shock.

“Th-the ice cream... He had cream on his finger and...she l-licked it...”

“Huh... So *that’s* the kind of relationship they have...”

Naturally, even Kojou, one of the least perceptive people when it came to matters of the heart, knew from watching this that they were more than good

friends. And in Rui's case, the flirting was heavily at odds with his normally cool words and actions. Though in one sense, perhaps that very coolness accounted for how he could be so bold as to flirt right outside the store—

“...Er?! Wait, Cas! What do you think you're doing?!”

Suddenly realizing that Shizuri had roughly risen to her feet, Kojou grabbed hold of her wrists.

Shizuri brusquely shook off his hands.

“I am putting a halt to improper fraternization with the opposite sex!”

“Hey, stop that, you idiot! That's gonna be way too awkward for everyone involved!”

Sensing danger to the entire squad's continuance, Kojou grabbed hold of Shizuri's clothing.

“And what do you intend to do if Yuno gets pregnant?! As squad leader, I cannot let this pass!”

“Are you dumb?! You can't get pregnant from licking a finger, dammit! Wait. Don't tell me that at your age, you actually think you can get pregnant from stuff like...”

“I am well aware of how sexual intercourse is conducted!”

With all the blood rushing to her head, Shizuri shouted without restraint before prying eyes. Her angry voice echoed through the corridors, causing every student and staffer in the PX to turn toward her, wondering what was up.

Noticing others' gazes upon them, Shizuri gasped and froze as she came to her senses. Kojou, holding on to Shizuri tightly, swiftly let go with his hands.

Somehow they managed to smooth things over, but when Kojou looked around the area, his eyes abruptly came to a halt on the action figure box right before them. It was a posable figure of some kind of anime character.

“Y-yeah, this is really elaborate. Action figures these days, they're precise down to the fine details.”

“E-exactly! These joints are made very accurately! Masterfully precise!”

Raising the action figure box high, Kojou and Shizuri sang its praises with voices that were loud on purpose. “Oh, so that’s what it was,” the customers at the PX told themselves, apparently losing interest in the pair.

Waiting for the atmosphere in the PX to calm, Kojou returned the action figure box to the shelves. Naturally, even Shizuri had regained her composure thanks to the uproar just then.

“...What, are you jealous of them or something?” Kojou probed in a timid tone.

Shizuri, slumped down in a crouch, looked mildly beside herself as she raised her eyebrows.

“Absolutely not. It is just, I am shocked that neither of them spoke even a word to me about it,” she said with a frail sigh.

Kojou smiled sheepishly and shook his head. “Well, of course they didn’t. You’re no help at all when it comes to romance.”

“Wh-why not?!” she shouted, aghast.

His appraisal that she, a paladin, was not someone worth speaking to rocked her sense of self to its foundations.

“Er, nothing fancy, it just seems like you have no experience in that area at all.”

“Wha—?!”

“Well, even if you did, I bet it had to be at the level of an elementary schooler at best.”

His blunt words stunned her, forcing her to stumble for an appropriate rebuttal. Even as Shizuri’s cheeks twitched in humiliation, she apparently could not deny his assessment.

“A-and what about you?! Do you have any experience falling in love with someone?!” she yelled in anger, even if it was misplaced.

“Hmm... Do I?” Kojou was at a loss.

For but a single moment, the facial features of a familiar girl returned to the

back of his mind like a flash. The illusion immediately dissipated, vanishing into the darkness of his memory once more. All that remained afterward was a faint aching in his chest.

“...Kojou?”

When he heard Shizuri’s voice in his ear, Kojou’s pupils regained their focus. When Kojou’s silence continued, Shizuri looked up at him with apparent concern.

“Nah, no good. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I still can’t remember a thing.” Kojou smiled and shook his head.

He sounded nonchalant about the matter, but Shizuri’s expression of concern remained unchanged. As if regretting her own words, she strongly bit down on her own lip.

“I am sorry... It was a terrible thing to say to someone who has lost his memories.”

“Not something you need to worry about, Cas. But, you know, thanks.”

Speaking this, Kojou raised an arm, lightly placing his hand on Shizuri’s drooping head. It was a casual gesture, meant to console a dispirited girl. But in that instant, Shizuri twitched, then her entire body froze over.

“...Cas?”

“I-it’s nothing!”

Shizuri held her wimple down with a hand as she backed away. Her voice shook as she spoke. Then, with a pale face and a tense smile, she shoved the shopping list against Kojou’s chest.

“I will leave the remainder to you. I have an urgent errand to run, so—”

“Uh, hey...!”

They already had two carts full of supplies with a long, long shopping list left to go. It was a quantity well beyond the capacity of one person to transport.

“What am I gonna do with all this stuff?”

Kojou clicked his tongue and grumbled a “geez” as he helplessly gazed up at

the sky.

3

“That is everything about the *Carceri*. All that we know about it, at least.”

Frivolously dressed in nothing more than a white gown over a swimsuit, Kako Magatoki was sitting cross-legged on a large boulder. Sitting across her knees was an old-fashioned, foldable tablet computer.

The tablet’s screen displayed a 3D image of a cave.

The cave’s diameter averaged about eight to nine meters. It was an enormous cavity that Kojou thought was more appropriate to call a natural underground cavern complex. The cave’s interior branched off in a complicated manner, with a total length said to run in excess of a hundred kilometers. In one sense, it was no exaggeration to call this huge cave the backbone of Onrai Island.

That day’s homework was for Kojou and the other members of the Kasugaya Squad to explore that enormous cave.

“Pretty different from what I imagined...,” Kojou said after taking a peek at the image. Because everything related to the *Carceri* was treated as top secret even within the College, this was actually the first time Kojou was seeing this for himself.

“I imagine so. It is a mixture of the largest cave system in the Far East, a tropical rain forest, and artificial underground structures. Quite a pretty sight, is it not?”

Turning her head to look at the cave entrance behind them, Kako raised one eyebrow with a look of pride.

There was only one entrance to the huge cave standing in the bowels of the volcanic mountain range at the center of Onrai Island. The enormous rift in the rock face, so imposing that it might well have been called the Gateway to Hell, certainly was a grand sight.

“I bet tourists would pay good money to see this,” Yuno chimed in as she readjusted the ties on her gloves.

That day, she was wearing a combat outfit that exposed places all over her body like some kind of female ninja. Apparently, the minimal fabric coverage gave her increased freedom of movement for when she was bestialized.

“That’s asking a bit much, though,” Rui said with a shake of his head and a pained smile. He was carrying a sniper rifle on his back.

In contrast to Yuno’s light gear, his was comparatively heavy. For close combat, he had an assault carbine and a pair of large-caliber pistols. All were loaded not with dummy rounds for training but with enhanced rounds for anti-demon combat. His futuristic, form-fitting combat suit was apparently a cutting-edge prototype, with ritual spell camouflage printed over it.

For his part, Kojou’s outfit was the same regulation school uniform and old-style military parka he always wore. The overwhelming disparity, enough to make people think he wasn’t even in the same squad, sat somewhat poorly with Kojou.

“You mean, because this is a Demon Sanctuary?”

“In the sense of protecting secrets? Of course, there is that, too...”

Kojou found Rui’s reply quite vague. It was Kako, holding her tablet, who continued the explanation in his place.

“An enormous source of demonic energy of an unknown nature rests at the deepest part of the *Carceri*, you see. The demonic energy brimming inside it leaks out from that source. As a result, the ecology inside the *Carceri* has changed abnormally, to the point that our notions of common sense are largely inapplicable. It is without question a dangerous area.”

“Is it fine sending students into a place like that?”

“Yes, because the students at our College can break through without any problems, you see. Is that not correct, Kasugaya?”

“Y-yes. Of course it is.”

When Kako suddenly called upon Shizuri, the latter nervously replied. Ever since the incident at the PX the day prior, she often seemed in some kind of daze. It wasn’t that he wasn’t paying attention, but Kojou didn’t exactly have

time to worry about her.

“I straight-up died in one of those College exercises, though...”

“Certainly, there are many unknown portions within the *Carceri*. It is a fact no one can call it absolutely safe. I strongly urge you to refrain from any rash actions.”

Kako had no care for his concern. She looked him square in the eyes and tightened her expression for once.

“For our convenience, we have divided the *Carceri* into seven strata. The seventh stratum is the deepest part. None have arrived at that stratum and returned alive. Presently, at least.”

“...Gotcha.”

Kojou nodded a bit as he looked at where Kako was pointing to on her map. The underground cavern deepened by stages, and the lowest stratum’s portions were largely blank. It was unknown territory even to the instructors of the College.

“The sixth stratum is a nest for Debris. Take that as meaning you will encounter Debris at an exceptionally high frequency. The density of demonic energy is far higher than anywhere prior, and even keeping one’s mind intact while approaching it grows difficult. For that reason, the fifth stratum is effectively the limit of what can be reached by humanity.”

“What’s on the fifth stratum?”

Shizuri and the others had already explored the *Carceri* numerous times in the past. Naturally, they already possessed some knowledge about the labyrinth. In other words, Kako’s explanation was directed at Kojou alone.

“That stratum contains a bulwark to seal the Debris away. A barrier is spread over it to prevent them from invading, much like a castle wall. Near sixty percent or so of the Demon Sanctuary’s budgetary expenditures must go to maintaining this barrier. In other words, that is just how critical this facility is to us.”

Kako voiced what struck him as a frightening truth. Maintaining the barrier in

the *Carceri* interior was chewing up over half of the Demon Sanctuary's budget. Put another way, no measure short of deploying such a powerful barrier could hold the Debris at bay.

"Of course, such a powerful barrier cannot fail to affect the human body. In particular, it would be fatal to a Demon such as you. I recommend that you do not accidentally approach it."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll take it to heart," he said sarcastically.

"Oh, it's nothing," Kako replied with a satisfied smile. "Thanks to that barrier, everything from the fourth stratum to the surface is a relatively safe area. There are corporate research facilities as well as permanently stationed researchers. This is an ideal environment for sorcerous engineering researchers, you see."

"...Research facilities? You've got stuff like that *inside* the labyrinth?"

"Well, it's dotted with small observation posts no larger than a weather station. Part of our job is to guard them."

That surprised Kojou, as did her addition, "Most of the posts are unmanned, so they also function as refuges for the students," spoken like an afterthought.

"The differences in the first stratum through the fourth are largely the lay of the land, and the rate of Debris appearing. It is best if you appreciate the distinctions between them with your own two eyes."

"That means Debris can pop up from the fourth floor on up, too?"

"The barrier of the fifth stratum is something like a fishnet, you see. It cannot completely prevent small Debris from leaking out. Making the eyes of the net smaller would add an even greater burden to the barrier."

"Meaning, our homework is to hunt the small Debris that break through that barrier," Shizuri concluded. She gently touched the scabbard of her sword. Though he felt like she was psyching herself up a bit in doing so, the proud demeanor was very like the overly serious Shizuri.

"Sheesh, who pushes dangerous work like that onto students...?" Kojou grumbled.

"It is a precious opportunity for students of Attack Mage High to gain combat

experience, and for the Demon Sanctuary, a precious way to reduce expenses. You use the tools you have on hand, yes?” Kako remained calm as she fished around in the pocket of her white gown. Finally, she took out an electronic device that neatly fit into her palm.

It was in the shape of a rectangle but with rounded corners, making Kojou think of a large eraser. There was a strap attached to the head of its yellow, plastic body for hanging from one’s neck.

“What’s that?”

“A support item for use in the *Carceri*.”

“It kinda...looks like a panic buzzer for an elementary schooler.”

Gazing at the yellow-colored electronic device he’d accepted, Kojou mumbled to himself, feeling let down. Somehow, the design made it feel humiliating to walk around carrying the thing as a student and Attack Mage candidate.

However, Kako said, “Is that so,” acting offended as she shook her head.

“If a time should come when you feel imperiled within the *Carceri*, give this strap a strong pull. Rescue personnel will hear the alarm and come running to the scene immediately.”

“Wait, so it really is a panic buzzer?!”

He wailed internally, despondent that the device’s function was exactly what it looked like. By walking around with that yellow panic buzzer dangling from his neck, he would feel the acute embarrassment of being marked as a rank amateur.

A malicious, leering smile came over Kako.

“In the *Carceri*, with the high density of demonic energy, there is a danger of complex magical devices malfunctioning. If anything, it is the very simplicity of a tool like this that makes it reliable.”

“That might be true...but why only give one to me? What about Cas and the others?”

“That would be unnecessary. All the squad members besides you are at least able to defend themselves,” Shizuri said coldly.

Kojou clenched his teeth. He got the sense that Shizuri also somehow felt the embarrassment from the panic buzzer intended for beginners.

“If you’re handing me this, does that mean you’re not coming with us, Instructor Magatoki?”

“I would prefer that you address me as Kako.” As if evading Kojou’s question, Kako spoke in a tone he could not clearly peg as joking or serious. “Being under an instructor’s command damages a student’s self-learning, you see. Thus, we train our students by having them do *Carceri* exercises alone. Are you scared?”

“Nah... I wouldn’t really call it scared, but...”

The problem is, I don’t even understand how dangerous the Carceri is in the first place.

That said, even if Kako, dressed frivolously in a swimsuit, white gown, and sandals, was to go with them, Kojou felt like it would only add to their tribulations.

“There is no need for concern, Kojou. So long as our preparations are thorough, there is no chance mere Debris will get the better of the Kasugaya Squad.” Shizuri puffed out her chest, perhaps intending this as some measure of consideration for him.

“That is simply the situation. It’s all right. My support will even the field, Akatsuki,” Rui said gently, in agreement with Shizuri’s baseless assertion. He offered Kojou his right hand.

Finding Rui’s gesture unexpectedly reassuring, Kojou shook his hand.

Yuno added both of her hands on top of theirs. “That means we’re all combining our strengths. We’re counting on you as our porter, Kojikoji.”

She sounded utterly serious about that, and Kojou’s smiling face froze. He was reminded that he would soon have to enter the *Carceri* carrying the heavy baggage of four people.

“It’s a huge help,” said Rui in a rather self-interested tone. Yuno gazed at Kojou’s sour look with a smile.

Shizuri, the only one on the team left out, stood still with her right hand half-

outstretched, with nowhere left to go.

4

The interior of the underground cavern was not flat; rather, the terrain was warped, as if magma had cooled and hardened that way. The oddly slippery ground surface combined with humid air meant that a moment's inattention would lead to the immediate slipping of one's foot.

Adding to such concerns, the areas of tapered rocks and nearly sheer cliffs all grated on Kojou's nerves. Though not even thirty minutes had passed since entering the cave, Kojou had promptly broken into a sweat all over.

Shizuri, walking at the head of the party, called out to the halted Kojou. "You are so slow! Just how long do you intend keep us waiting?!"

What illuminated her and the others in that darkness were pale fireballs that hovered and swayed in midair. They were apparently a type of *shikigami* known as Instant Wisps. With ritual energy consumption reduced to a bare minimum, they excelled at being able to freely adjust the lighting level over a prolonged period of time.

With the wisps accompanying them, Shizuri and the others looked less like Attack Mage candidates out on an exercise and more like characters in an online role-playing game.

"Can't be helped, geez! If you're not happy with it, help carry a little more of the load!" Carrying a giant rucksack on his back, Kojou retorted between labored breaths.

The reason he was relying not on wisps but on the ordinary flashlight in his hand was that he could not use even beginner-level ritual spells. Thanks to that, Kojou could not shake the impression that he was the only one out of place.

"How can you treat me with such disrespect after I reduced the baggage?"

When Kojou finally caught up, Shizuri stared at him with an exasperated expression, huffing in annoyance.

"There was too much to begin with! On top of that, it's all your personal stuff!

Health products, weight-training gear, the tea set...”

“The tea set is necessary!”

“It’s the least necessary!”

As Kojou was venting his dissatisfaction, his eyes came to rest on creepy pillars standing tall before his eyes. They were a pair of crystal pillars reminiscent of the archways at a Shinto temple. Even Kojou, deficient in knowledge of spellcraft, could grasp that powerful ritual energy emanated from them. They were likely one component of the barrier that sealed the Debris away.

“So ahead of here...is the real *Carceri*, huh...?”

“We are still at the entrance to the first stratum. Take care not to touch the barrier gate, would you?” Shizuri said, mace at the ready.

Without a word, Rui released the safeties of his guns. Yuno pulled down the hood of her coat, exposing the animal ears they had kept hidden. Each was on guard, ready to enter combat at any moment. On the surface, they were behaving the same as usual; Kojou knew they felt tense.

That instant, Kojou was assaulted by a strange sensation. Somehow, he felt like he’d seen their expressions before.

“Kojou?” Shizuri asked, glancing at his frowning face.

“Oh, uh... It’s nothing.”

Kojou hastily shook his head, going after Yuno and Rui, who had already begun walking ahead.

After walking for a little while past the crystal pillars, the appearance of the *Carceri* completely changed.

The ceiling remained at the same level as before, but the depth of the cave increased as precipitously as a sheer cliff. The horizontal breadth of the cave, broad to begin with, grew broader still. Rifts that seemed to go down like a giant stairway were a breathtaking sight. To Kojou, they evoked a great chasm. The light of the wisps was no longer sufficient to see the opposite side.

Here and there amid that underground chasm, lights flickered to and fro.

They were wisps just like the ones Shizuri and the others were using. Apparently, there were students other than Kojou's squad heading down into the *Carceri*.

From what Kojou's vision could see, there were six, maybe seven sets of wisps hovering within the chasm. Apparently, far more people were prowling inside the *Carceri* than he'd expected.

"Those lights... Are all those parties from Attack Mage High...?"

"Oh yes. Grading assessments are beginning anytime now, you see."

"Assessments?"

"One of the requirements necessary for graduation is the number of Debris you destroy," Rui explained. "Even if it is dangerous, you cannot get credits for that without going down into the *Carceri*."

"Got it," said Kojou grudgingly.

Most of the classes at the College were self-study; no unified curriculum existed. With the races and abilities of the students all over the map, that only made sense.

In the end, the mock combat on school grounds was viewed as part of training only and not directly tied to student appraisal. If that wasn't the case, Kojou would have long been booted out of school for insufficient grades.

However, the school did have one place to make those appraisals—thanks to the existence of the *Carceri*.

"Seems like a pretty harsh system to me."

"Well, you might be right about that." Rui's agreement came easily even though it was clearly criticism of the school.

"But if one sends Attack Mages lacking actual combat experience on missions, all that awaits them is tragedy. If one cannot overcome this, it's better to not strive to be an Attack Mage to begin with."

"I guess so..."

As Kojou climbed down a cliff with poor footing, his unpleasant mood caused

him to fall silent.

Attack Mage was a catch-all term for someone with special skills and abilities for dealing with sorcerous criminals. From time to time, that surely meant direct combat with dangerous demons and magicians. Naturally, it was not grades on appropriate written tests but exploits in actual combat by which they should be judged—he grasped the logic of it quite well.

Even so, it didn't sit well with Kojou for some reason.

Kojou wasn't attending the College for the sake of fighting anyone. He'd been told that if he didn't get his Attack Mage certification, he could never leave the Demon Sanctuary, so he aimed to be an Attack Mage for lack of any other choice—that was all.

The same probably went for Yuno, a beast person, and Rui, aiming to become a researcher.

This being the case, the true nature of the problem might not be Attack Mage High's assessment process but the twisted system of the Demon Sanctuary that isolated demons from human society.

"Stop the excessive private conversation and concentrate. You are entirely too relaxed about this."

Glaring at Kojou as he indulged in absentminded reverie, Shizuri spoke with a bitter tone. "Geez, sorry," said Kojou, raising both hands. Certainly, this was not the time to think about the problems with Demon Sanctuaries.

"But Debris don't pop out much on the first stratum, right?"

"That only means the encounter rate is low!"

Even before she finished speaking, Shizuri raised her beloved mace aloft. Then, with Kojou standing right before her eyes, she thrust it toward him full-force.

"Huh?!"

As Kojou stood rigid, what the flange of the mace crushed was on the rock face behind him—a creepy silhouette crawling out from a gap. It was a mass of something viscous, kind of like a large lizard, giving off a disgustingly moist

sound as it was sent flying.

As if that were a signal, similar silhouettes emerged from the rocky places to and fro.

Each was around the size of a small dog. They were bizarre magical creatures that seemed like a cross between amoeba and beast. They numbered in the dozens. They continued to gather from all around the area, almost as if they were attracted by Kojou's scent.

"The hell's with these things?!"

Kojou felt a chill run up his spine as he staggered backward. The magic creatures followed suit, their entire bodies bouncing and quivering. It wasn't enough to make him feel fear, but they definitely creeped him out.

"A type of undead. The Onrai Island term is *Larva*."

Rui spoke thus as he let out a string of shots from his pistol. Eating large-caliber pistol rounds, the magical creatures burst apart. Apparently, the magical creatures really didn't represent much of an individual threat. However, their numbers were simply overwhelming.

"...Larva?"

"Most of them are corpses of flora and fauna that turn into monsters when exposed to demonic energy inside the *Carceri*. In other words, they are natural-born zombies. The saving grace is, to date, few students have died within the *Carceri*, so it is rather rare to encounter a human-form Larva."

"So... You mean it *has* happened...?"

What a disgusting "natural" thing, Kojou thought with an earnest grimace. The mere fact that these were rotting, walking animal corpses was plenty reason to consider them creepy as hell. He wasn't confident he could retain his composure if a human-sized Larva really did appear before his eyes.

"Kojikoji, even if you're immortal, there's no telling what'll happen if you die in here, so you'd better not do anything reckless like last time, 'kay?"

Yuno hid behind Kojou's back as she stated that with an air of concern. To her, someone who chiefly fought directly using hand and foot, Larvae were no doubt

something to touch as little as possible.

“Got it. Yeah, that thought gives even me chills.”

Kojou simply nodded. Even as he was, Kojou bore the nonsensical title of World’s Mightiest Vampire. Becoming a zombie on top of that would be too pathetic for words. Of course, Kojou wouldn’t die even if he wanted to, but still

—

“So how are we going to exorcise them anyway? If they’re monsterized corpses, doesn’t that mean they’ll keep regenerating forever even if you squish ‘em...?”

“We call them Larvae because the corpses have not been brought back to life. Having died once, their bodies are merely ‘objects.’ They move mechanically based on their memories from before they died... That is all.”

“Meaning, they look like they have will, but they’re really the same as the dolls?”

Even if they were referred to like haunting spirits, they weren’t attacking Kojou and company because of resentments toward the world of the living—that’s how Kojou took Shizuri’s explanation, which provided him some sense of relief.

Shizuri hoisted her slime-marred mace once more. “Correct. Accordingly, if one pulverizes them past maintaining their shape, they can recover no more.”

“Pulverize—Wait, you’re gonna smash this many of them?”

Looking past Shizuri’s shoulder to survey the area, Kojou’s expression stiffened. Before he knew it, the number of wriggling Larvae around them had exceeded fifty. If that number of monsters attacked all at once, even Shizuri wouldn’t be able to cope, or so he thought.

“Larvae have a tentative territorial range, so it truly is rare for them to appear in such numbers, I must say,” Rui explained as he swapped pistol magazines. He shrugged with a consternated expression.

“So what gives?” Kojou asked, perplexed.

Yuno grinned. “This is just a guess, but it looks like they gathered ‘cause

they're drawn to your demonic energy, Kojikoji. Larvae eat the demonic energy gushing up inside the *Carceri*, so they tend to be drawn to the densest demonic energy on hand."

"Wait a sec, you're saying this is my fault?!" Kojou exclaimed, mouth agape.

Shizuri and Rui averted their eyes in a nonchalant manner. From their demeanor, Kojou instinctively knew that Yuno was right.

Apparently, the cause of suddenly falling into a crisis in the "comparatively safe" first stratum of the *Carceri* was that Kojou's Fourth Primogenitor demonic energy was leaking out of his body all on its own.

It made for an absurd story, but the situation could not be dismissed with a laugh. If Kojou's demonic energy was what the Larvae were after, the Larvae would probably pursue them no matter how far they ran.

It was difficult for Rui to dispatch the Larvae lurking in the shadows of the rock face by pistol. That didn't mean they could use explosives on a cliff like that, either.

The idea of using himself as a decoy and drawing the Larvae off did come to mind, but Kojou immediately brushed the thought away. Just imagining having those viscous lumps following him all over the place made a bad chill run through him. Besides, Yuno had drilled into him not long ago not to do anything reckless.

However, that didn't mean he could come up with any other plan for busting out of that situation.

What to do...? thought Kojou, gripping the shoulder belts of his heavy rucksack.

Suddenly, he heard great laughter that was very much out of place.

"Ha-ha-ha! I wondered what group might be in such spectacular straits, and here I find Miss Castiella. How fortuitous to meet in such a place!"

Looking down at Kojou and company from the top of the cliff was a large man clad in sparkling silver armor.

He was not large in the sense of being especially tall; he was actually shorter

than Kojou. The broadness of his shoulders and the thickness of his chest, plus the mass of his musculature that seemed like armor clasped over his entire body, was what made the man look big.

An audacious smile came over his thick lips as the man fondly narrowed his eyes.

“President Okurayama...!”

With an air of weariness, Shizuri invoked the armored man’s name. A faint echo of relief was mixed into her voice.

“Who?” Kojou murmured with a perplexed expression.

He hadn’t thought anyone would be nosy enough to go out of their way and poke their nose into a large Larva horde.

“Shidou Okurayama, the student body president. He’s in his fourth year, but he’s one of the most capable people in the school, so he works as an acting instructor, too.”

Having reflexively turned his gun barrel toward the armored man, Rui lowered both his guard and his pistol.

“Wait, he’s still a student...?”

Kojou was shocked at the other meaning of Rui’s words. Judging from the man’s appearance, tone of voice, and the exceptional presence behind them, Kojou had imagined that the man in the armor was thirty years old. Being told the guy was eighteen or nineteen with that body made Kojou feel like he was being taken for a ride.

“What fate it is to meet you in a place like this. It violates the principle of self-study, but I shall lend you a hand!” He let out a mighty howl and drew the sword at his back. “No need for restraint!”

His weapon was a two-handed great sword about as long as he was tall. The blade was broad and thick, looking more like a sledgehammer than a sword.

Okurayama swung the insanely heavy sword with ease, smashing it into a Larva right below his eyes, bluntly mowing a Larva down along with the surrounding rock in which it had lurked. It was such an absurd sight that Kojou

was no longer certain who the real monster was.

Behind him, a single female student followed suit. She was probably Okurayama's teammate. She had long, black hair and teary eyes. The girl was beautiful and had a gentle air about her.

She was wearing a College schoolgirl uniform, but thanks to her being too stylish for it, the effect felt oddly sensual. The collar of her blouse was only open down to the second button, but even so, ample cleavage was visible.

"Nozomiiii!"

Happily waving with both hands, Yuno called out the girl's name. The black-haired schoolgirl smiled, making a little wave of her right hand. The sight caught Kojou's eyes.

"The babe is Nozomi Kamikiba. Last year's Miss College of Magical Arts. Also a D-type."

Turning her head toward Kojou, Yuno glanced up at him with a teasing smile. *Interested, aren't you?* her way of speaking implied. Kojou couldn't deny it.

"D-type...!" he exclaimed, forgetting all about hiding his shock. D-type meant a descendant of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord—the sort of vampire knowledge common to all. In other words, she was one of Kojou's few kin.

He'd heard there were vampires besides him at the College, but obviously he'd never expected to run into one in a place like this. Of course, that she was immensely beautiful was also unexpected.

"So the boy over there is the rumored Fourth Primogenitor?" Okurayama calmly said as he mopped the floor with the Larvae.

"Hey, I'm Kojou Akatsuki."

Even while overwhelmed by Okurayama's sheer force, Kojou did not yield, introducing himself with a loud voice. Even if he'd lost his memories of the past, he apparently hadn't lost the sportsman's ethos his body had been immersed in.

"Hmm. A pleasure. Seems like you're a dependable one!"

Nodding in satisfaction, Okurayama kept his sword poised as he turned to

face Shizuri.

“Incidentally, Miss Castiella. I take it that your destination is OS Base on the first stratum as well?”

“*Certamente*, that is the plan.”

Shizuri nodded as she assisted Okurayama. OS Base apparently meant one of the observation posts placed inside the *Carceri*. It seemed that, barring special circumstance, it was customary for Attack Mage High students visiting for self-study to gather and take a breather at that place.

Nodding heavily, Okurayama addressed Nozomi standing right at his side. “In that case, we shall go with you. Kamikiba.”

“Yes, President.”

Nozomi tossed her long hair back as she advanced.

Even then, countless surviving Larvae were wriggling in front of Kojou and company, barring their path. However, Nozomi showed no fear as she emotionlessly gazed upon them.

“—Please, Therese.”

From her outstretched right hand spread a cloud of fresh blood infused with demonic energy.

That scarlet cloud shimmered like a mirage, transforming into a summoned beast surrounded by flames. The monstrous bird had huge wings, bird-of-prey legs, and the upper body of a human being—a harpy. Nozomi Kamikiba was a vampire, and this was her Beast Vassal.

Yes, one of the very bestial vassals that dwelled within a vampire’s own blood.

These were concentrations of demonic energy so dense that they possessed their own will. They were monsters that could not be harmed, short of slamming even stronger demonic energy against them. It was the existence of Beast Vassals that made Attack Mages fear vampires as the kings of Demonkind.

The harpy summoned by Nozomi spread its blazing wings, mowing the surface

of the ground.

That second, dozens of Larvae were blasted apart, annihilated without leaving a single trace. The same went for the individuals concealing themselves in gaps between the boulders, for the harpy's flames dissolved the huge boulders, scorching them along with the Larvae lurking within.

"So this is...a vampire's Beast Vassal...," Kojou murmured in a daze, watching the frightening yet beautiful summoned beast under Nozomi's control.

This was the weapon of a vampire, with which they could smite any foe and protect their loved ones—a summoned beast from another world.

Or perhaps it was a malevolent power, with which to destroy everything and exist separate from all doctrines of the world.

This was an ability that Kojou—Fourth Primogenitor and World's Mightiest Vampire—had once obtained, and one that, along with his memory, he had lost.

5

"Just when I was wondering what OS Base meant... It was a hot spring all along...?"

The subterranean cavern was very broad, with white steam hovering all over the place from nearby hot springs. Switched into a swimsuit, Kojou rested his chin on the edge of the rock bathtub, tiredness coming over him.

Four hours after entering the *Carceri*, Kojou and company had arrived at the first observation post: a log house resembling an old mountain cabin. It had a cafeteria and a field hospital, enough beds that thirty or so students could lodge in it, a powerful barrier, and, so he was told, corporate-hired guards protecting it full-time.

Unlike a regular mountain cabin, it had devices for measuring demonic energy, engineered from expensive materials, dotting the cabin interior...and there was a natural hot spring bubbling up from the center of the broad subterranean cave. Once they arrived at the base, the various members of the

Kasugaya Squad finished with meals and equipment maintenance, after which they visited the springs to take a breather.

“It’s a secret bath reserved especially for the students of the College. They call it a recuperation facility, though,” Rui said, stretching his wrists in the bath. He strained a smile.

Incidentally, the hot spring was a carbon-dioxide type, the sort said to heal fatigue and light burns and abrasions. When his teammates further asserted to him that it could restore depleted ritual energy, even Kojou couldn’t say, *This isn’t the time to take a break in a hot bath*. Besides, he keenly understood the desire of Shizuri and the others to cleanse their bodies after fighting viscous monsters like that.

“So this is why Cas took all that time picking a swimsuit, huh...?” Kojou said with a sigh as he recalled events at the PX the day before. When Shizuri had spotted the swimsuit section in the middle of their shopping trip, she’d made Kojou hold the bags while trying swimsuits on over and over for close to an hour. Thinking back on it now, she must have been fondly looking forward to the underground hot spring.

“—Are you lodging a complaint?”

Shizuri, emerging from within the steam, glared sourly at Kojou, having overheard his murmur. OS Base’s rock bath was only gender-segregated in the changing rooms. Wearing a swimsuit was mandatory, so this felt less like a mixed-bathing experience and more like a heated-pool dip.

Shizuri was wearing a simple, white bikini that matched the color of her hair. It was not a particularly bold design by any stretch, but more of her skin was visible than Kojou had anticipated.

“Nah, not really. If anything, I’m relieved you dressed according to common sense. I mean, I half expected you to wear one of those retro swimsuits that looks like a prison outfit.”

“What do you take me for...?” She pouted and sulked at his oddly composed reaction.

In place of the wimple she always wore, she covered her hair under a bath

towel wrapped like a turban. The sight of her ears and nape exposed was so new to Kojou that, if anything, he paid more attention to that than the swimsuit.

“Seems like I kept you waiting! Uwaa, that hot spring smell...!”

“H-hey, Yuno! Don’t push like—*Hyah?!*”

When Yuno appeared from behind and stroked her back, Shizuri let out an adorable yelp.

Yuno was wearing a colorful, checkered triangular bikini. The edges of the swimsuit had modest-looking frills, but they only accentuated her small but very curvy body.

“Shizuri and I picked it out together last night. Isn’t it cute? Isn’t it so cute?”

Yuno, energetically jumping into the hot water, twirled around in front of Rui, showing her swimsuit off.

“I suppose it is. It suits you quite well.”

Rui smiled in his usual gentle fashion, paying special attention to the lines of her swimsuit as he spoke. Yuno blushed happily and giggled.

What is this, a date? Kojou grumbled internally, quietly moving away from the flirtatious pair.

A moment later, he set eyes on a large man relaxing in the shadow of a rock.

Okurayama, there with a hand towel on top of his head, showed the whites of his teeth as he smiled at Kojou.

“What is it, Mr. Fourth Primogenitor? That’s quite a sour look on your face.”

“Nah, I’m fine. I was just thinking about this *Carceri* a bit.” Kojou couldn’t help speaking what was on his mind when faced with Okurayama’s unexpectedly sharp observational skills.

Okurayama slightly narrowed his eyes, making a throaty “mm-hmm” as he nodded.

“It seems that this expedition is your first time in the *Carceri*. Small wonder you are bewildered by them.”

“Well, yeah. I mean that should be the case but... President, can I ask you one thing?”

“But of course. It’s my role to teach and guide the younger students. Ask any question you have.”

Kojou quietly made a pained smile as he listened to the style in Okurayama’s voice. He really couldn’t think of the student president as a boy in his teens. He seemed far more like an instructor than Kako did.

“So. I wanted to ask... Prez, why do you want to be an Attack Mage?”

Okurayama raised his eyebrows, deeply interested in Kojou’s discourteous question.

“It would seem Mr. Fourth Primogenitor has some reservations about becoming one.”

“I get why you need professionals to deal with sorcerous criminals and demon beasts, but it’s like—it doesn’t ring a bell with me... At the very least, going around killing the Larvae and Debris here in the *Carceri* feels different.”

Kojou felt irritated that he couldn’t phrase it any better than that. He was reminded of when he was speaking to Rui on the first stratum of the *Carceri*.

Something was wrong about the current makeup of the Demon Sanctuary. It was twisted—the existence of the *Carceri* and Debris included. He felt oddly like...he was shut away in the wrong place.

“I understand where you’re coming from.”

“What?” Kojou gaped. He hadn’t expected to hear that.

Amused, Okurayama shot him an impetuous smile. “Surprised? I’ve doubted myself from time to time... In particular, when looking at people like Kamikiba up close.”

“Kamikiba...?”

“For the sole reason that she was born as a vampire, she cannot freely leave this puny little island unless and until she becomes an Attack Mage. ‘Is there something wrong with the world?’ I wondered.”

“...Figures you would.” Kojou nodded as he bit his lip. The two of them felt similarly on that matter.

“However, those with power must shoulder responsibility of equal weight. I’m embarrassed that I can only put it like this: I hope you grow to become the sort of man who can bear a grandiose title like yours.”

“That would be nice,” Kojou said with a weary shake of his head.

The Fourth Primogenitor—the World’s Mightiest Vampire. Kojou knew he couldn’t run from that. The weight of that title wasn’t something anyone had taught him; he’d understood it from the start. Even with his memories currently lost, Kojou’s own title was his single, unwavering truth.

Setting aside his abnormal regenerative capabilities, Kojou had no powers as a vampire, though. If it was not for Shizuri and the others covering for him, the current reality was that he couldn’t take out a single Larva.

Without his powers, could he really alter the twisted present state of the Demon Sanctuary? Kojou’s hesitation about that was the underlying cause of his gloom.

Okurayama, not knowing what rested in Kojou’s heart, broke out in laughter.

“I must say I’m relieved, though.”

“...Huh?” Kojou tilted his head.

Crossing his arms in front of his broad chest, Okurayama nodded, quite satisfied for some reason.

“I mean, the fact that you, supposedly stronger than anyone, are searching for the right way to use that power.”

“Nah, it’s nothing as noble-sounding as...”

“From what I hear, you’ve lost most of your abilities as a vampire. Perhaps this is a test that will help you overcome that hesitation. Mmm, nothing wrong with that.”

“Ha-ha...”

Okurayama brought a weak laugh out of Kojou, who smiled painfully, but he

really did feel somewhat better. Okurayama must have identified the source of Kojou's anguish from the start. In contrast to his hearty exterior, he was a perceptive man. It seemed that he wasn't student president for nothing.

Kojou thanked Okurayama and got out of the hot water. While remaining heedful of the irregular footing, he made his way toward the men's changing room. Thanks to having done some deep thinking in the hot spring, he felt like the inside of his head had turned to mist. It seemed best to leave early and replenish fluids.

He glanced behind himself.

That instant, something abruptly rose in the corner of Kojou's mind.

On the other side of the white steam obstructing his vision, a fragment of a memory rose up like a flash of light. A blue sky. A bright sunny day. An artificial city, wrought from carbon fiber, resin, and magic. It seemed so close he could reach out and touch it, yet it would recede into the distance if he actually tried. The sight was simply that: fleeting.

In the end, it was nothing more than an illusion between blinks of the eye.

The memories he tried to grasp slipped through his fingers, vanishing like mist.

While standing still, he heard a gentle voice. "Akatsuki, are you all right?"

When Kojou rapidly spun around, unthinking and unguarded, she almost let out a yelp.

From unexpectedly very close, Nozomi Kamikiba was looking up at Kojou with concern. She had moist eyes and glossy lips. Thanks to her long, black hair being tied up, her slender neck was particularly accentuated. Her white skin had a faint twinge of redness to it, making her face oddly sexy.

However, what shocked Kojou far more than this was the sight of her bare, slender shoulders.

Nozomi's body was clad in a single white bath towel. He could see no sign of the swimsuit she ought to have been wearing. Even though the towel was less revealing than a swimsuit alone, the towel being the only article visible

suggested far more to his imagination.

“Ah, yeah. I just thought I’d get out for a bit.”

He quickly tried to look away, but Nozomi circled around to his front. It felt like she was about to squish herself against him.

Nozomi looked up at Kojou while leaning forward slightly. “Is that so? I’m glad, then.”

Kojou had no way to determine whether a swimsuit actually existed under the bath towel wrapped around her body. What Kojou did barely manage to confirm was that the cleavage created by Nozomi’s breasts ran quite deep.

“I’m sorry, Akatsuki.”

“Huh?”

Seeing the melancholic look in Nozomi’s downcast eyes, Kojou tilted his head, body remaining rigid.

“I did not intend to eavesdrop, but I heard a little of your conversation with Shidou earlier. That is, the part about being unable to use your powers as a vampire—”

“Ah... Nah, it’s not like I was trying to hide it or anything.” He strained a smile, awkwardly trying to slip past her. She seemed to read his intention and closed the distance between them even more.

“Perchance, would you like to try it?”

“...Try what?”

The corners of Nozomi’s lips curled up provocatively as she exposed her white fangs, showing them off to Kojou.

“Vampiric activities.”

“...Huh?! Whaaat?!” Kojou’s voice went shrill when he realized just what Nozomi had in mind.

Activities by which a vampire sought the blood of the opposite sex—the trigger for vampiric activities was not hunger, but lust. In other words, Nozomi was seducing Kojou.

Eccentricities aside, this was a hot spring. Everyone showed a great deal of skin, and with the dense steam, there was no concern about prying eyes. On top of that, Nozomi was beautiful enough to be crowned Miss College of Magical Arts. All the best checkboxes had been ticked.

“It’s possible such activities might awaken your vampire powers. Furthermore, by sharing the blood memories of the Fourth Primogenitor, I might obtain even greater power. I do not believe it is a poor offer...for either of us. How about it? Just once?”

“Umm, ummm, but...”

Playing with Kojou like he was food, Nozomi pressed her bath-towel-wrapped breasts against him. The seductive sensation made Kojou audibly clear his throat. Nozomi smiled with her sharp canines poking out, licking her lips with the moist tip of her tongue.

“Tee-hee. Or am I dissatisfying as a prospect?”

Kojou backed away. “Er, that’s... I wouldn’t say that exactly—”

A frigid voice said right into his ear, “Dissatisfied about what?”

Kojou flinched. A schoolgirl in a white swimsuit stormed over to him.

“C-Cas...?!”

“Oh my.” Nozomi blinked her eyes as she looked at Shizuri, who mercilessly twisted Kojou’s right arm upward behind his back.

“So you have finally revealed your true colors, Kojou! What did you intend to do to Nozomi in the brief span of time I took my eyes off you?!”

“I-idiot! I haven’t done anything yet, geez!”

“...Yet?” Shizuri murmured in a flat voice as she put more strength in the hands gripping Kojou’s arm. The fierce pain seemed to shoot straight to his brain, making Kojou let out an incoherent yelp.

Observing this, Nozomi shook her head as if lightly scolding a child. “My, my. You mustn’t, Kasugaya. Violence is against the manners of the bath.”

“This is not the time to speak about manners! And Kamikiba, please refrain

from seducing members of the Kasugaya Squad!”

“My, I am not seducing him at all. Am I?”



“How can you say that while pushing your breasts against him?! This is why they call you Friendly Fire and Circle Crasher and things like that!”

“Oh my, Kasugaya, so scaaary.”

Making an exaggerated tremble with her sweet voice, Nozomi strongly pressed her breasts against Kojou’s right arm. A quite peeved Shizuri tried to pull Kojou with equal vigor. The joints of Kojou’s arms made a disagreeable sound as they reached the limit of the burden they could endure; yet even so, the battle between Shizuri and Nozomi did not come to an end.

Okurayama rose from the bath with a great spray of water, interrupting the conflict. Slowly surveying the bath area, his eyes came to rest on the jostling between Shizuri and Nozomi. Then, he made a satisfied-looking nod.

“Hmm. Good, it seems you have all become friends.”

With those words, he let out a hearty laugh.

What the heck? Kojou’s shoulders slumped in exhaustion. Nozomi made a pained smile as she let go of him.

She probably hadn’t given up on seducing Kojou, but at the very least, the fact remained that Okurayama’s entrance onto the stage had shattered the erotic atmosphere. *See you again*, said Nozomi’s suggestive wink. Noticing this, Shizuri’s cheek twitched.

“Well then. Now that we’ve cured that fatigue, how about we get going?” Okurayama suggested in a carefree manner, thoroughly ignoring the atmosphere created by Shizuri and Nozomi.

Nozomi made only the tiniest strained smile as she immediately yielded to the student body president. Watching as the pair returned to the changing rooms, Kojou let out a deep exhale.

“That guy, President Okurayama, is incredible...in more ways than one...”

“He’s the only one who could team up with Kamikiba without a care,” Shizuri murmured in a daze. The poison had drained from her expression.

Apparently, the Okurayama Squad having an unorthodox number of members was the fault of Nozomi rather than Okurayama. Of course, the fact they had

permission to walk through the *Carceri* as a pair meant their might was overwhelming.

“Incidentally, would you let go of me already? It’s, uh, making me think too much about some stuff...”

“...Huh?” Shizuri turned to look up at him. “To what do you refer?” Suddenly her cheeks reddened in embarrassment. She’d realized she was touching her own swimsuit-covered breasts against Kojou’s arm.

Shizuri had a slender physique, but Kojou still thought her breasts were surprisingly soft. They were inferior compared with Yuno’s and Nozomi’s, but that only made the contact feel even closer, like he was being drawn into her skin.

“Wh...wh...what...are you...?”

“And...sorry for calling you thin and stuff lately. I take it back.” He nodded with a sober expression. “Well, of course they aren’t on Amase’s or Kamikiba’s level, but Cas, yours are surprisingly—”

Before Kojou could complete what he thought had been an apology, Shizuri lowered her body into a crouch, and delivered a splendid, textbook judo throw, sending Kojou sailing into the air.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

Hurled into the hot spring headfirst, Kojou’s cries were erased by the sound of the pillar of water he sent rising.

As Kojou sank into the hot water, Shizuri attempted to hurl a huge boulder at him to finish him off, but Yuno and Rui rushed in to stop her.

6

“Today, we shall continue to BB Base on the second stratum. From tomorrow onward, we shall use that as our base camp for conducting investigations of the second and third strata. Understood?”

Having finished changing into her usual knightly attire, Shizuri was speaking

while spreading out a map. It had been two hours since they'd left OS Base. They would arrive at the second stratum of the *Carceri* in no time.

In a straight line, it was roughly five kilometers to the base indicated by her finger. However, the terrain drawn on the map was curved and complex, well-deserving the name of *labyrinth*, something Kojou had already had his fill of.

In contrast, Yuno had a dramatic reaction to the term *BB Base*, leaning her body forward.

"Ohh, so we're having grilled meat tonight?"

"...Grilled meat? Wait, don't tell me that BB Base stands for barbecue..." Kojou pressed his hands against his head. "What the hell is wrong with this school?" First a hot spring, now a barbecue; none of it held the tension of a field exercise.

"It's fundamentally difficult to build an eating facility inside the *Carceri*, after all. Having students grill their own meat is a last resort on the school's side of things," Rui explained, smiling gently like usual.

"Really...?" Kojou was still skeptical, though.

"Besides, in a sense, magical combat is a battle of wits and deceptions behind the scenes. One cannot fulfill the mission of an Attack Mage by being serious all the time, so being a tad frivolous is just fine."

"I guess... Come to think of it, Natsuki always behaved in a way that made it hard to tell if she was joking or being serious..."

Kojou's own murmur gave him a jolt of surprise.

Countless unfamiliar scenes raced through the corners of his memories like bolts of lightning. His head started hurting—a lot. He saw a girl with long, black hair and an extravagant dress, with the delicate, youthful beauty of a porcelain doll. However, the phantom image sank to the bottom of his memories as quickly as it had appeared. It vanished completely, leaving only an unpleasant malaise behind.

Feeling the heat of everyone's stares, Kojou gasped and lifted his face. As he did so, his eyes met the half-lidded eyes of Shizuri and company glaring right

back at him. *Who's Natsuki?* asked their questioning faces.

Of course, even if they asked such a question, Kojou had no answer to give them. "The name of yet another girl, huh?" murmured Yuno without ill intent; a delicate, indescribable air was coursing among the members of the Kasugaya Squad.

Heedless of that was, of course, Okurayama, who laughed in a loud, exuberant fashion.

"As our destination is the fourth stratum, that means we'll be operating separately after the next base. The road remaining is short, but take good care of us, 'kay?"

"Please do."

Nozomi flashed a charming smile as she crept closer to Kojou. Shizuri forced herself between them in an apparent preemptive strike. While they were both smiling broadly, their eyes possessed a certain sharpness. They seemed ready to kill. Kojou gently moved away from both girls, trying not to be noticed as he advanced. He didn't want to be a party to their dispute any longer.

The exit from the stretch of ravines called the first stratum became a narrow passage so confining that the large-statured Okurayama could just barely fit. The meandering path continued for what seemed like an eternity.

As soon as they somehow slipped through that stifling terrain, exiting into an open area, Kojou narrowed his eyes in surprise.

Spread before him was a dense forest.

Rock faces were covered in moss. The green trees stood thickly together. Pouring down over their heads were the dazzling rays of the afternoon sun.

For an instant, Kojou felt like they'd returned to the surface.

However, that was not the case. Kojou and the others remained in the subterranean labyrinth. What seemed like an enormous well was likely some sort of shaft. They were at the bottom of a vertical cavity some ten meters in diameter.

The ceiling to the underground labyrinth had caved in, making the serene blue

sky visible far overhead.

The subsequent sun shower had to have caused plants to propagate, and so the bottom of the subterranean cavern had turned into a tropical rain forest.

“You mean...? This is the second stratum of the labyrinth...?”

“Yes. The second stratum is a sea of trees. Forests spread throughout the subterranean cavity,” Shizuri proudly explained to the stiffened Kojou.

“I believe you were warned about this from the start but try to pay heed to the rivers flowing through the sea of trees. It is said that the underground waterways continue all the way to the ocean.”

Kojou’s voice trembled. “Underground...waterways...”

A ferocious chill crept up from the pit of his stomach and made him feel like his heart had skipped a beat. It wasn’t that he was surprised by the dense forest spread before him—quite the opposite. This should have been Kojou’s first visit to the second stratum of the underground labyrinth of Onrai Island. Yet, he knew this forest scenery.

“Come to think of it, Kojikoji, are you bad at swimming?” Yuno asked him in concern. Kojou’s face was pale. She’d apparently misunderstood, thinking a fear of drowning was the cause of his turmoil.

He didn’t have the luxury of clearing up Yuno’s misunderstanding at the moment.

“No... The waterway... I see... That’s why, I...”

He was assaulted by dizziness fiercer than any he had felt before. This became a torrent of countless feelings of déjà vu crashing against him. Kojou’s mind was ferociously tossed around as memories of past and present jumbled together.

“It’s all right. Me and Ruirui and Shizurin and Shizurin are right here with you.”

“Why did you say my name twice?”

“Well, that’s just how dependable you are.”

Yuno kept her tone light and cheerful to console Kojou. Shizuri crossed her

arms and sighed with dismay. The pair's voices echoed inside his head. Yes, Kojou knew this conversation between the girls—

“I'll head out for recon, then.”

Extending her ears, Yuno's irises narrowed like those of a cat. Something strained inside her boots, causing the soles to produce a peculiar sound. Equipped with nimbleness, agility, and sensory acuity far in excess of that of a normal person, she was the right person for the job for reconnaissance in that dense forest. She could secure a safe route all by herself. That was Yuno's role in the Kasugaya Squad.

“Please do.”

“Leave it to me!”

Having obtained permission from Shizuri, their squad leader, Yuno leaped forward, leaving a light *tap* of her feet behind.

As she swooped down upon a treetop, she used the recoil of the flexible branches to jump once more. She looked as happy as a kitten that had been given a new toy. Even a dense forest with poor visibility was the same as an exciting playground to a beast person like Yuno.

Melting into the shadows of the thickly growing trees, Yuno's small body promptly vanished from sight.

“—Amase, don't!” Kojou shouted.

“A-Akatsuki?” Wide-eyed and perplexed, Rui looked at Kojou.

For once, bewildered expressions also came over the tag team of Okurayama and Nozomi.

“Miyazumi, stop Amase right now! Call her back!” Kojou urged.

Attempting to calm down the agitated Kojou, Shizuri approached him as if she was soothing a puppy. “What is the matter, Kojou Akatsuki?”

Kojou grimaced. The sight of her like that gave him déjà vu. Kojou already knew what was going to happen from that point onward.

“Outta my way, Cas! At this rate Amase's in danger!”

“K-Kojou Akatsuki?!” she exclaimed. Raising her eyebrows, she quietly added, “And who is this Cas of whom you speak?”

Kojou rudely shoved her aside. Casting off the heavy baggage from his back, he raced into the forest, chasing after Yuno, who was already out of sight.

Due to the branches and leaves of the overgrown trees, the forest’s interior was dark. The scent of raw tree sap pricked at his nostrils. The dense, humid air slipped through the gaps of his parka to wrap around his skin.

Brushing aside the tree branches that impeded his path, Kojou continued running intensely. The tree roots covering the ground acted like natural traps that tried to ensnare Kojou’s feet. Numerous lacerations were carved into his skin, and the abrasions on his legs were beyond counting.

Despite how hard he tried, Kojou couldn’t catch up to Yuno. Her quickness and endurance were far superior to even a vampire’s.

That was why, from the very beginning, Kojou hadn’t even considered catching up to Yuno.

He didn’t need to chase after her. After all, Kojou already knew where Yuno was going. Kojou was running to reach the destination ahead of her.

Once he recognized the back of the bestialized girl, Kojou shouted, “Amase!”

Yuno’s pointy ears moved around as she, wide-eyed, slowly looked behind her. “Err, Kojikoji? How in the world did you catch up to me?”

She was standing near a large swamp inside the dense forest, atop one of the clusters of mangrove trees growing at the water’s edge. The sight of her standing on top of a tree with sunlight pouring down looked like a scene straight out of a movie. It seemed surreal.

But Kojou didn’t have time to be captivated.

At the same time Kojou came out of a crack in the dense forest, the air behind Yuno moved.

“Amase, run!” he shouted, short of breath.

Suddenly, something tore deep into Yuno’s left shoulder. Blood gushed out from the wound. Violet flames had shot out from thin air, turned into a blade,

and gouged Yuno's flesh.

"Wha...?!"

Yuno's small body sailed into the sky and then slammed into tree branches as it fell to the ground. There was so much fresh blood scattering into the air, it dyed the area around her crimson.

Kojou desperately ran to the scene and picked her body up where it had sunk into soft mulch.

"Amase! Hold on, Amase!!"

"It...hurts... What the...?"

Staring at her own bloody palm, Yuno put on a frail smile. Kojou could say nothing in reply; all he could do was meaninglessly gnash his teeth.

A surge of malevolent demonic energy brushed past Kojou's left cheek. The being that had attacked Yuno had materialized above the swamp.

Spawning from the void, the air shuddered as the contours of an enormous beast took form.

It was a grotesque monster with many tentacles. It couldn't clearly be identified as beast nor insect.

"Why would a Debris be...here of all places...?" Yuno murmured. Fresh blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

She was bleeding even more than he'd thought. The wound was serious enough to have knocked out any normal person long ago.

Beast person or not, she wouldn't last long in such a state. Even Kojou, with no medical knowledge whatsoever, knew that.

However, Kojou and Yuno didn't have time on their side to stop the bleeding. The monster attacked once more, focusing on Yuno. One of its demonic-energy-infused tentacles became a blade that mowed the dense forest down at an angle.

Picking up Yuno's body, Kojou slid under the tentacle, evading its attack just in the nick of time. The strike tore apart numerous trees, which then burst into

flames one after another.

“Kojikoji, run ahead of me... I’ll...be all right, so...”

“Yeah, I’ll run. Together with you!”

Kojou made that one-sided declaration, ignoring Yuno’s earnest plea.

He had no intention of abandoning her. Why would he have come all this way if he didn’t intend to help her? The real issue was that Kojou didn’t know if he *could* get away, even if he was on his own.

Already the flames had surrounded them in the dense forest, so there weren’t many escape routes to be had. More important still, the Debris’s attack power was overwhelming. Those blades of violet flames could probably kill either of them from one attack at point-blank range. He couldn’t save Yuno like this.

If only I could summon a Beast Vassal— Kojou bit his lip in frustration.

According to what he’d heard, the power of one of the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor should have been capable of destroying a mere Debris in an instant. However, in his current condition, Kojou was unable to summon a Beast Vassal. He was powerless.

The Debris raised up a tentacle of flickering flames.

Still holding and shielding Yuno, Kojou froze. Two tentacles were coming simultaneously from left and right. There was no way he could dodge. Despair gripped his heart as he prepared for the worst.

Bathed in countless bullets, the Debris’s tentacles burst apart.

“Akatsuki!”

His entire body enshrouded in a barrier of ice, Rui emerged, breaking through the wall of flame.

With a roar, the assault carbine he wielded spat out a hail of bullets. Compared to the rounds of Rui’s favorite pistols or those of common submachine guns, the bullets used by the high-velocity rifle packed a heavier punch. Its rate of fire was seven hundred and fifty rounds per minute. In the blink of an eye, a large quantity of silver iridium-tipped rounds were pumped into the Debris, making its enormous body sway.

“Miyazumi! Amase’s—!”

“I know. More importantly, watch out! Behind you!”

“Behind...?!”

At Rui’s urging, Kojou looked back, gaping when he noticed the surge of demonic energy blowing his way. It seemed to envelop Kojou and the others, warping the air as a second Debris emerged from within the dense forest.

But what bewildered Kojou more than this was the existence of a small shadow standing on the new Debris’s back. It was an unfamiliar figure, its entire body enveloped in an all-black robe.

The slender, feminine silhouette gave off the image of a beautiful Grim Reaper.

The shadow’s right hand was gripping a single sword, still in its scabbard.

The pitch-black shadow raised the sword above her head.

“*You*...again...?!”

Kojou trembled as the words escaped his lips.

Dizziness like never before struck him, driving him to his knees.

He recognized this silhouette. *She* had stood before Kojou and the others time after time, filling him with despair.

“Don’t tell me... You’re controlling them...?! The Debris...!” he shouted in anguish.

The robed shadow looked back at him, breaking into a smile—or at least Kojou thought she did.

The second Debris howled and began to charge in his direction. Mowing down the dense forest between them like brittle candy canes, its enormous forelegs moved to crush Kojou and company.

However, an incandescent beam from above slammed the Debris against the ground.

In truth, the beam was a vampire’s Beast Vassal—the harpy Nozomi Kamikiba had dubbed Therese.

“Devour, Hauras!”

Immediately following Nozomi’s Beast Vassal, Shizuri leaped in, brandishing the long sword that undulated like a flickering flame. Aiming for the rampaging, wounded Debris, Shizuri mercilessly slammed her radiant blade into it.

Watching Shizuri fight, Kojou strained his raspy voice to utter, “Kamikiba... Cas...”

The secret armament Hauras consumed the demonic energy of its opponents, using it to enhance its own might. To Debris, masses of demonic energy, the weapon was fatal, their veritable mortal enemy. The swing of Shizuri’s sword slashed the Debris’s huge body apart, turning it into demonic mincemeat.

During that time, Nozomi’s Beast Vassal spun around to back up Rui, who unleashed large, high-powered grenades and offensive spell tablets without reservation, overwhelming the Debris. With Nozomi’s Beast Vassal joining in, the tides of battle had turned. Having lost most of its tentacles, the Debris could do nothing but endure the one-sided beatdown.

“You did well to notice your teammate was in peril. Just as I expected of you, Mr. Fourth Primogenitor!”

Letting out a hearty laugh, Okurayama was the final one to come into view. Behind him were the remains of multiple Debris that had been blown apart. Apparently, Okurayama had butchered the lot of them all by himself. The Debris summoned to that place hadn’t been limited to the two after Kojou and Yuno.

“And a woman controlling the Debris... Would you be the rumored Ghost of the *Carceri*?”

Easily whirling about the two-handed sword as tall as his own body, Okurayama turned its tip toward the human silhouette.

Kojou was still holding the injured Yuno in his arms; his cheek twitched.

The silhouette in the robe exhaled briefly. The action resembled a mocking laugh. A second later, an especially enormous, pitch-black Debris emerged at her feet.

Clearly different from those that had come before it, this was a complete

beast of a monster.

“Ha-ha! It’s useless! Do not underestimate the power of the Student President of the College of Magical Arts!”

With a ferocious howl, Okurayama broke into a sprint.

Geometric symbols appeared on his great sword; they were magic. This was only natural for a prospective Attack Mage. Not only did Okurayama boast simple brute strength, but he was an exceptional spellcaster as well. Swinging down his spell-augmented great sword, Okurayama slashed toward the Debris with a mighty roar.

Consumed by fear, Kojou shouted, “Don’t, Prez! This is—!”

“Nn...?!” Okurayama twisted his face.

The pitch-black Debris opened its mouth wide, and from its gaping maw came a dark beam—

Without a sound, that beam tore Okurayama’s sword apart. It pierced even his armor’s defenses and opened a large hole in his torso.

“Guh... I have failed...!”

Fresh blood splattered violently as Okurayama fell to the ground faceup. Kojou stared, dumbfounded by the sight. His head hurt as if it was on fire. He felt like his memories were being overwritten by force.

“President—!” Nozomi shrieked.

Her harpy Beast Vassal turned into a blazing comet as it flew toward the Debris. Rui moved simultaneously, bringing his oversized sniper rifle down from his back and sniping at the robed woman standing on the Debris’s back.

“No... Stop...!”

Kojou’s murmur was aimed not at Rui or Nozomi, but toward the woman in the robe. Before it could reach her, the robed woman emitted a voiceless cackle.

In an irritated fashion, the black Debris swung a shadowy-looking foreleg toward the harpy.

The dazzling beam scattered fireworks, blasting apart the Beast Vassal. The harpy, which should have been absolutely immune to damage save from even greater demonic energy, was destroyed by the pitch-black Debris all too easily.

Rui's precise one-shot, one-kill round found its way to the robed woman's heart, only to slip through her body. There was no bullet impact, no damage, nor even the slightest change to the bullet's arc. The bullet had not touched the woman's flesh. The spectacle truly looked like it was a ghost that had been sniped.

"Therese...!"

"That's impossible..."

The unexpected results of their own attacks froze them both in place.

Taking advantage of their mental lapse, the pitch-black Debris spewed its beam. It became a dark blade, mowing down huge sections of the dense forest, and Nozomi and Rui with it.

The spectacle was one-sided and so very cruel. Kojou stared, unable to raise his voice.

"What...? What in the world...? How did—?!" Shizuri shouted with a haunted expression on her face, her blade glowing crimson.

Shielding Kojou and the wounded Yuno, Shizuri blocked the beam. It was no doubt precisely because Hauras devoured demonic energy that she barely managed to withstand it.

However, even with the power of Hauras, there was no proof that she could defeat an intangible "ghost" —

"Do you understand now...Kojou Akatsuki...?"

The robed woman's voice echoed through the burning forest. It was a flat, unnatural voice wrought not from vocal cords but from a spell. It contained bottomless malice and just the faintest hint of pity.

"No matter how many times you repeat this, it will end the same... You cannot protect anyone..."

"I'm...repeating this...?"

The woman's provocative words delivered a blow that seemed to shake Kojou to his core.

Lost memories. A torrent of déjà vu.

Where had he come from? Why was he there...? Questions entwined his fingertips like cut pieces of thread.

Yes. Kojou knew the secret of this world.

"Don't tell me... The one who wiped my memory was..."

"The peace and tranquility you desire is nothing but an illusion... It must all be destroyed...by your hand..."

"Shut up... Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Anger surged in Kojou's entire body, painting his vision a deep red.

It was no longer an issue of whether he could summon his Beast Vassals or not. The robed woman's taunts had made Kojou's emotions explode. The vast demonic energy of the Fourth Primogenitor was unleashed without restraint; the dense forest's soil ferociously quaked in response.

"Kojou!"

Realizing that something was very wrong with Kojou, Shizuri put strength into the hand gripping her sword.

What arose in those eyes was great anguish and inner turmoil.

Now that he'd forgotten himself and run amok, Kojou had become a threat greater than the Debris. If he continued emitting his inexhaustible demonic energy, the *Carceri*—nay, Onrai Island itself—would inevitably collapse.

Shizuri was the only one who could stop it. Should she judge Kojou Akatsuki was a dangerous being, it was Shizuri's assigned duty as a paladin to cut him down on the spot. That meant, however, that she would slay a member of her own squad.

As if to mock Shizuri's gloom, the robed woman loudly laughed.

Kojou shook with anger, his demonic energy turning into pale bolts of lightning that made the world shudder.

Shizuri's hand on her sword trembled.

Kojou raised his right arm high. A line of fresh blood trickled down from where he had bitten his lip. A crimson mist infused with demonic energy enveloped the area around him.

A sealed Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor had been released.

Instinctively afraid, Shiruzi screamed.

The shadow of an enormous beast swayed behind Kojou, about to split the earth. But just before it could—

“No, Senpai. You mustn’t—”

—Shizuri heard a gentle voice, as if a little girl was scolding him.

A nearly transparent girl came into view, trying to move up against the berserk Kojou.

Shrouding her entire body was static that resembled a rainbow sandstorm. Her right hand gripped a metal spear, glowing silver. The girl looked exactly like the ghost that Shizuri and Kojou had encountered the other day.

“.....!”

The girl's voice became the trigger that brought the glint of reason back to Kojou's eyes. On the verge of exploding, his demonic energy dissipated as if it had never existed, and the quaking of the world relented.

“Sword Shaman...of the Lion King Agency... Why are you...?!”

The robed woman's voice trembled with shock and rage. The ghostly girl's appearance had cruelly stripped away all her composure.

The Debris unleashed a beam directly at the ghostly girl.

Nonetheless, the girl's expression did not change. Her spear erased the attack with ease. Then with a single blow, she rent the pitch-black Debris's own body. It dissipated into nothing.

By the time the Debris's fragments scattered as particles of light and vanished, the robed woman had also disappeared from sight as if she had disappeared into thin air. She had concealed herself and fled.

“Who are you?! What is that spear...?!” Shizuri asked the girl.

The girl twirled the spear without a word. With the static surrounding the supposed ghost, Shizuri was more keenly aware of the dazzling radiance given off by the girl’s weapon.

“*Ngh!*” Shizuri turned her sword toward the girl.

The ghost, perhaps aware of Shizuri’s hostility, quietly poised her spear in turn. It was a stance with no openings, reminiscent of a supple and ferocious feline beast. Her fighting spirit was as tranquil as the serene surface of a lake.

In contrast, Shizuri adopted an upper-left stance—an offensive form in kendo known as the Fire Stance. With thunderous spirit, she sought to make up for the reach disadvantage with attack speed, betting everything on her opening strike.

Time seemed to stand still as a tense silence fell between them.

The two read each other for even the slightest changes in breathing. As both reached the zenith of their tension—

“Stop, *Himeragi!*”

Shielding Shizuri, Kojou leaped in front of the ghostly girl.

Without a word, as if certain from the start that was what he would do, she thrust her spear forward. Kojou’s arms were both spread apart as it aimed for his heart.

“What...?” he murmured frailly, gazing at the tip of the spear impaling his own chest.

His entire body became enveloped in dim light. It was glowing, rainbow-colored static just like that of the ghost girl. With the spear linking both their forms together, they flickered like mirages and vanished.

“Kojou!”

Shizuri stretched her hand out toward the fading boy’s back.

However, her fingertips never touched Kojou’s flesh as they futilely slipped through thin air.

When Shizuri wobbled and looked back, he was nowhere to be found. The

World's Mightiest Vampire and the girl with the silver spear had both vanished. It was as if neither of them had existed in that world to begin with.

The only ones remaining afterward were Shizuri and the unconscious Yuno.

At the last place Kojou stood, the military parka he'd been wearing fell to the ground.

In a daze, Shizuri dropped her sword, clutching the gray parka against her.



Intermission II

The sun trickling over the water's horizon made the beach shine white.

There was a predawn sea breeze. Gentle waves quietly drew near, drenching the body of the boy who continued sleeping like the dead. His looks were decidedly average, and he lay facedown at the edge of the crashing waves.

The back of his uniform was torn, as if some sharp bladed object had been thrust through it.

The area around him was marred with traces of blood. It coursed from the open wound, dyeing his back a glossy crimson. Such a deep wound would have killed any normal person.

The color had completely drained from his lips. His breathing was ragged, unstable.

To the side of his face, the air shuddered with a growl. It was a low, irregular, vibrating sound resembling distant thunder.

The sound gradually increased in clarity, finally turning into the roar of a turbo shaft engine.

“Ugh...!”

The boy's voice trickled out in anguish as crude wind pressure seemed to slam right into him.

An aircraft was descending, vigorously causing waves to ripple over the surface of the sea. Despite that, it looked unobtrusive, as if it simply melted into the sky. It was a multi-role reconnaissance helicopter from Europe's Didier Heavy Industries.

A dazzling searchlight shone down upon the boy's back.

Amid the haziness of his mind, the boy crawled over the sand as if to escape the light.

He heard light footsteps, almost like wings. The recon helicopter was hovering in midair as a small girl leaped down to stand on the beach.

“I finally found you, Senpai.”

There were both fatigue and relief in the girl’s voice.

The somehow familiar ring of the girl’s voice made the boy slowly open his eyes.

She still had traces of youth, but the girl’s face was pretty. Her body was slender and delicate yet did not give off a frail impression. She possessed a supple tenacity, like a blade forged by a master swordsmith.

The girl was wearing a white sailor-themed school uniform with a blue collar. Her hand was gripping a silver spear.

“...Sen...pai?” the boy asked back amid the confusion of his mind. He struggled to reach out to his memories, supposedly somewhere, yet just a tiny bit beyond his reach.

Her name. Her identity. And the reason she called him Senpai... He could not remember things he ought to know. Things that should have been obvious. Anxiety gripped him.

“Could it be that you do not remember, Akatsuki-*senpai*?”

As if sensing his reaction, and somewhat peeved by it for some reason, the girl quietly poised her spear. Her glossy hair danced in the wind, her eyes staring straight at the boy, a powerful will residing within them.

She thrust her polished, silver blade, resting it against the throat of the still-prone boy.

This became akin to a trigger, sending fireworks scattering in the back of his mind. A veritable beam of vast memories pressed against him all at once, making him let up an agonized groan from the blow.

It was all over in a second, though. The fog in his mind cleared, like awakening from a long dream.

Grimacing with the pain from the wound in his chest, Kojou hopped up from the beach.

“Himeragi!”

Pushing the soaked hair from his face, Kojou stared back at the girl wielding the spear. She was Yukina Himeragi, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—the *true* watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“Yes, Senpai.”

Yukina slowly lowered the spear, making a small smile of relief. It still felt like she was pouting a bit, but that was probably a measure of just how much Kojou had made her worry.

But her charming smile and reserved eyes froze when Kojou continued with a question.

“Where’s *Cas*?”

“...What?”

Without even blinking, all expression abruptly vanished from Yukina’s face as she stared at Kojou.

However, careless as it was, Kojou did not notice the change in her, his face remaining completely serious.

“Cas. Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella! The white-haired girl who was with me—”

You saw her too, right? Kojou was about to say, but for some reason, Yukina made a half-lidded glare that cowed him into silence. Then, she posed a question in a composed manner.

“The white-haired one. Pretty, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. Well, if you’re asking me my opinion, I’d say she’s pretty, but...”

To Kojou, Shizuri gave off the impression of a wordy and meddlesome girl; however, in terms of appearance alone, she was a very beautiful person.

When Kojou politely acknowledged that fact, Yukina gazed at him more coldly still.

“Senpai, what is the relationship between you and this girl?”

“Relationship? That was one-sided, with her monitoring me... I don’t know much about her business, but she was always around when I was on Onrai Island—”

“I see. Meaning she was with you the entire time, Senpai.” She then murmured to herself a quiet “I see.”

She broke into a smile. It was a perfect, smiling face without any flaws whatsoever. But despite the pleasant response it should have elicited, Kojou went rigid, feeling a nonsensical chill.

“Could you tell me about it in greater detail?” Yukina asked, grasping her silver spear tightly.

The morning sun rose over the water’s horizon, shining upon the beach where Kojou and Yukina stood.

Floating up amid the morning mist was a horde of modern buildings—an artificial city wrought of carbon fiber, resin, and magic. It was the landscape of the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island.

The engine noise of the hovering recon helicopter continued to echo above the pair’s heads.

Kojou stared in a daze at the nostalgic sight of the artificial isle.

Almost as if he had never seen the island before—



CHAPTER
THREE
ANOTHER
REALITY

CHAPTER THREE

ANOTHER REALITY

1

Asagi Aiba looked down at the early morning skyline from the roof of an enormous building.

The building's name was Keystone Gate. Located at the very center of Itogami Island, it was a large-scale structure in the form of an inverted pyramid. Not only were all of Itogami Island's city functions such as electricity, communications, and traffic management all administered out of it, the structure also served as the safety mechanism for the artificial isle proper, making it the literal keystone.

Constructed with forty strata underwater and twelve aboveground, the roof of Keystone Gate was the tallest place on an artificial isle that had little curvature of the land. There was nothing to obstruct the azure, eternally summer sky above Asagi's head. Beneath her, the modern skyline of Itogami Island unfolded.

The roof of Keystone Gate had no guardrails. After all, it was never designed with ordinary residents standing upon it in mind.

However, there was no hint of fear or tension in Asagi's eyes.

Without a care, she sat on the edge of the roof, legs and bare feet dangling over the side as she made a gloomy sigh.

Strings of strange characters resembling a spell coursed across the screen of the notebook PC sitting upon her lap.

Roughly four weeks had passed since the large-scale invasion of Itogami Island by the Holy Ground Treaty Organization, the massive international

incident commonly referred to as the war of the primogenitors.

During that time, the environment surrounding Itogami Island had undergone a dramatic change, the greatest of which was its secured independence from Japan. The present island was known to the world not as a single city within Japan, but the fourth Dominion. It was the city-state of Itogami, territory of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Surprisingly, independence may have brought political friction, but no great problems had developed.

At the very least, no nation had yet come forward to officially object to the Fourth Primogenitor's actions. Also, when the HGTO invasion occurred, the Japanese government relinquished its territorial rights to Itogami Island, leaving it unable to object to the Fourth Primogenitor taking the island over instead.

On the other hand, if anything, countries besides Japan viewed the Fourth Primogenitor showing himself on the international political stage as something to be welcomed. The Japanese government had been able not only to keep the Fourth Primogenitor concealed from the public up to that point and under blatant observation but had engaged in direct negotiations with him from time to time. *Better this than the Japanese government being the only one able to use the Fourth Primogenitor*, thought other countries—and who could blame them?

Even so, that did not mean the relationship between Itogami Island and Japan had completely dissolved.

At present, while Itogami Island was a sovereign nation under international law, her people were generally free to travel to and from Japan. All judicial and financial matters remained under the jurisdiction of the Japanese government, and the law enforcement activity on the island was still conducted by Japanese police officers and federal Attack Mages. It absolutely was not rare for a nation of Itogami Island's small size to entrust a portion of its national functions to a neighboring nation like this. Even where transport of foodstuffs and economic activities were concerned, much was entrusted to Japan, with the island treated as a Demon Sanctuary just as before. In one sense, the relationship between Itogami Island and Japan was closer than ever.

That said, this did not mean everything before independence remained the same.

In particular, the burden of administering Itogami Island had increased precipitously.

The establishment of nationhood had come with a vast outpouring of political formalities and administrative work, explaining things to the confused island residents, maintaining public order, and inspecting and administering the Relic of the Cleansing that Dimitrie Vattler had left behind...

These issues were being addressed by Kazuma Yaze, senior manager of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, and Sensai Aiba, former mayor of Itogami City...and the Priestess of Cain, also known to be a mysterious programming genius.

High-functionality applications to support government staff...city maintenance systems to deal with the vast, sudden increase in artificial isle urban areas due to the appearance of the Legacy...strategic AI functions for predicting diplomatic difficulties that would arise and providing guidance for their resolution... She'd whipped up all these things in less than a week.

Though the Gigafloat Management Corporation's incredible information accumulation capabilities and former Mayor Aiba's political skills had done much, substantial credit for saving the new city-state from crisis so soon after the nation's founding surely went to her—

The girl on that desolate rooftop with a notebook PC before her displayed not a single smidgen of pride in that accomplishment.

Her mind was focused on the strange strings of characters that continued scrolling past her screen. This was the source code of a particular program that she had obtained through reverse engineering.

However, in the end, how could that program be described—?

The code differed from the language used by any computer currently in existence. It involved nigh-impossibly-vast multiprocessing. There were strange algorithms based on mathematical principles yet to be unraveled. Routines with no normally understandable meaning were clearly created with the intent of

being used in conjunction with magic. No normal engineer could decipher or reassemble it, perhaps not even classify it as a program at all.

Like a puzzle maniac solving a particularly difficult crossword, Asagi was deciphering that strange code on the fly. The glint in her eyes was far too aggressive to be called pure, rational inquisitiveness.

“Hey, li’l miss. How’s it coming?” a synthetic, electronic voice asked her. She smiled impetuously at the question.

The speaker was a 3D, badly sewn CG teddy bear visible in a corner of the PC’s display. This was the support AI that Asagi had dubbed Mogwai—the avatar of the five supercomputers that administered all of Itogami Island’s urban functions.

“How’s it coming? It’s as you can see. Whoever made this wasn’t sane. Using an external agent to handle spellcraft calculations is an idea similar to The Cleansing, but the technical difficulty isn’t remotely comparable.”

“That’s because for The Cleansing, the magic’s the main event. The external calculations are just there to help.”

“I suppose so. More importantly, Mogwai, did you notice? This code—”

“Yeah. There hasn’t been any data streamlining or measures to raise the efficiency rate. Like this, the burden’s too heavy for even the latest, greatest supercomputers to run it properly.”

“Either it’s simple sloppiness, or the creator didn’t feel that making it more efficient was even necessary—”

Certainly, as pure software, the program before her was exceptionally inefficient, but if the software’s inefficiency could be overcome through hardware capabilities, the lack of excess processing meant that the total execution speed would be that much faster. The very absence of compression meant that the calculations themselves would be more precise. Even if it was too vast an amount of data for current computers to handle, so long as technology continued to evolve, the calculations would cease to be impossible in several decades.

She was afraid of saying so out loud, though. After all, that would mean

acknowledging that this code had been written for hardware in a nonexistent future—

“Well, setting that aside, I’ll miss—”

Mogwai altered the tone of his voice, seemingly to tease Asagi for her internal shudder. His somehow-pompous tone made Asagi sourly twitch an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Yaze sent a message.”

“From Motoki? What’s it say?” Asagi asked in a disinterested tone of voice.

Her gaze remained directed at the notebook PC’s display. As she did so, Mogwai gazed at her through the PC’s built-in camera and laughed with a sarcastic *“keh-keh.”*

“Apparently they found my bro Kojou. He’s being taken to a hospital by chopper right now.”

“—Why didn’t you say that sooner?!”

Gruffly folding her still-operating PC, Asagi jumped to her feet.

2

In the seas surrounding Itogami Island proper, countless artificial isles floated around it in a spiral.

This was the relic of a super-advanced ancient culture that Cain the Sinful God had left behind—the Ark of the Sinful God.

In truth, the horde of artificial isles was Cain’s very own castle for protecting the populace in the otherworld known as Nod. It came furnished with numerous automated defense systems and ancient weapons. It was a vast fortress city that had temporarily served as the cause of a great war that had threatened to envelop all corners of the globe.

However, the menace posed by these weapons had been lost during the war of the primogenitors.

Wrapped up in the direct confrontation between Dimitrie Vattler, Master of Serpents of the Warlord's Empire, and the Fourth Primogenitor, the weapons had been nearly completely destroyed.

The current Ark that spiraled around Itogami Island was nothing but a large, artificial isle.

They'd barely begun to inspect its interior. The Ark was still largely shrouded in mystery. Even so, as construction of roads and ports advanced, people volunteering to migrate to it kept pouring in from all over the world.

Kojou Akatsuki—the missing Fourth Primogenitor—was discovered on the extreme southern tip of that Ark, on an uninhabited Gigafloat artificial beach.

They had found him on the third morning after he had vanished.

“Only three days...?”

The air was filled with the scent of antiseptic. Kojou sat cross-legged on a hard bed as he let out a bewildered voice.

It was past eight AM at Saikai Academy's clinic. It had taken about thirty minutes for the helicopter that had picked up Kojou, washed up on the beach, to return to Itogami Island proper. It brought Kojou and company straight to the Saikai Academy schoolyard.

They had landed there and not at the Gigafloat Management Corporation, because Kojou had been rescued by private activity with no connection to the Itogami city-state. Apparently, they couldn't exactly let the citizens of a freshly founded Dominion know their ruler had been missing, three days or no.

Also, they'd gone to the school clinic room because it was pointless bringing a vampire primogenitor with an immortal body to a hospital. That said, it wasn't as if he didn't require any treatment whatsoever.

“Yes, Senpai. You were gone for *three whole days*,” Yukina replied with a dead serious look on her face as she wrapped fresh bandages around Kojou's bare upper body.

The gauze beneath the bandages had turned reddish black after soaking in his blood. Fierce pain ran through him as he breathed. This was the wound left

from where Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf had impaled him.

A vampire primogenitor was immortal, but that didn't mean they healed instantly from every injury. After all, special attacks existed that impeded a Demon's healing abilities.

This effect was especially large where wounds inflicted by Yukina's spear were concerned. The Divine Oscillation Effect that nullified demonic energy lingered in the open wound, which no doubt accounted for the continuous damage.

This was the third time Kojou had been impaled by Yukina's spear. On the prior two occasions, it had taken a fair bit of time to heal as well, but this wound was the most horrid of them all—so deep it traveled all the way to his back, gouging an area right next to his heart. The wound was grave enough that a normal person might have been killed instantly.

That said, with Yukina looking so haggard before him, he couldn't really complain. In the first place, at present, Kojou didn't even have a satisfactory understanding of the situation he'd been placed in.

"Lady Sword Shaman fell into a state of panic when thou wert gone, Sir Boyfriend. I hath barely seen her sleep a wink in these last three days. In all likelihood, she hath not had a proper meal."

Picking up in an oddly stiff tone of voice was a red-haired girl wearing the uniform of a famous primary school.

This was Lydianne Didier, young daughter of the family that had founded Europe's Didier Heavy Industries. She was an elementary schooler, but she was an elite child with PhD-level intellect. She had piloted the recon helicopter that had recovered Kojou.

"Oh really?"

Listening to Lydianne's explanation, Kojou looked at Yukina to confirm. The Sword Shaman murmured, her words caught as she glared at Kojou, angry for a reason he didn't understand.

"O-of course I would be nervous over losing sight of my observation target!"

"Gotcha. Sorry to make you worry like that."

As Yukina clenched his bandages, Kojou gave her a light pat on the head.

For a while, Yukina remained wordless, with her eyes downcast and her cheeks red. Finally, still flushed, she poured strength into the wrapped bandages she gripped. For some reason, anger suddenly seemed to well up in her.

“...Is that all you have to say after making people worry so much?!”

“That hurts! Wait a—Himeragi... The bandages are too tiii—! Oww!”

“...So you know, we were worried about you just as much. Having the all-important Fourth Primogenitor kidnapped with not even a month passing since the Itogami city-state’s independence... That’s no joke, man.”

Twisting off the pull tab from a can of coffee was Motoki Yaze, saying what he really thought for once. The tone was as flippant as usual, but the thick bags under his eyes testified to his own troubles. After all, on paper, Yaze was the man ultimately in charge of the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

However, Kojou exhaled with a sullen look. “Not like that really mattered anyway. Normally you’re the one who handles all the difficult negotiations in the first place. And the primogenitors in other Dominions don’t come out in public much, do they?”

“Seriously? Not showing their faces in public isn’t the same thing as being whisked away.”

“Well, I guess you’re right...”

Kojou grudgingly acknowledged the point. His being barely able to run a Dominion after his one-sided declaration of independence during the war of the primogenitors was heavily due to the work his best friend had done after becoming head of the Yaze family. In the middle of that process, Kojou, the cause of the upheaval, had vanished without any prior notice. It wasn’t as if he didn’t understand why Yaze was annoyed.

Grimacing from the coffee’s bitterness, Yaze turned to face Kojou head-on. “So, what the hell happened? Give us the nitty gritty.”

Having finished treating Kojou, Yukina made no effort to hide her curiosity,

bringing her face very close. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but the look in Yukina's eyes that morning was downright scary. "Yes, and give us all the details of your relationship with this Kasugaya, too."

"I've been saying it over and over, geez. For the past six months I've been at a Demon Sanctuary called Onrai Island. I've been training as an Attack Mage, having mock battles against *shikigami*, and fighting ghosts in a dungeon and stuff—"

"...Half a year, you say?"

Yukina knitted her brows a bit. From their point of view, Kojou's absence had only lasted three days. She couldn't exactly be blamed for taking Kojou's talk of it spanning half a year at face value.

"Driving off ghosts in a dungeon... Really?"

Yaze had a glazed-over look on his face, like he might break into laughter at any moment. He pulled a smartphone out of his pocket, input a shortcut, and turned the screen Kojou's way.

"Would you be referring to this?"

"What's that...?"

Gazing at the smartphone, Kojou narrowed his eyes, perplexed. On the screen was the public website of a well-known toy manufacturer.

"It's a game: *Carceri Arcade*. You enter an individual, capsule-style cabinet and enter the game world through FSVR—one of those Full Sense Virtual Reality action game thingies."

"...An arcade game? You mean like the things they put in game centers and at amusement parks?"

Kojou felt a stirring in his chest as the smartphone screen scrolled before him. He didn't think the game screenshots displayed on the website had anything in common with his Onrai Island experiences. However, he did feel like he had a faint recollection of the large, coffin-like game machine itself.

"Sir Boyfriend, thou participated in local testing of this new product in a video game arcade at Thetis Mall, after which thou didst not come out."

“I never...came out?” Kojou stared at Lydianne in shock.

He wasn't avid enough to be called obsessed, but Kojou still gamed as much as the average person. Back in middle school, he stopped at an arcade on the way back from club activities on numerous occasions at the invitation of his friends. The complex knowledge and techniques demanded were tough, but he had a quiet confidence in his ability to master games based purely on reflexes and intuition.

So if he just happened to be on-site when an interesting-looking game was being tested out, it wouldn't have been strange for him to participate on a whim, but he didn't know what *didst not come out* was supposed to mean.

“You disappeared from inside the game cabinet. You vanished without a trace like some super-skilled stage magician,” Yaze bluntly replied. “Himeragi's rampage after that was quite a sight, I tell ya.”

“...Huh?” asked Kojou, bringing his brows closer, bewildered. “Whaddaya mean, rampage?”

“I'm saying, she put a bunch of the Thetis Mall guardsmen in the hospital. The game company manager apparently lost his memory of the last several weeks and acted like a terrified child.”

“Himeragi... You didn't...”

“Th-that's not true! I merely considered the possibility of an organized kidnappi... You are making the wrong assumption about me!”

When Kojou stared at Yukina in a daze, she threw out a torrent of tearful excuses.

“Good grief,” sighed Kojou, turning his gaze to the smartphone once more. “*Carceri Arcade*, huh...? The name rings a bell, but that was no game. Even with cutting-edge tech, it's not like you'd feel enough pain to actually die, right?”

“Well, sure you wouldn't in a normal game. You might get rocked around a lot and feel loads of stimulation, but...”

Sipping the last of his coffee with an audible *slurp*, Yaze shrugged a little.

Kojou grimaced, adamantly shaking his head. Rui, Nozomi, Okurayama, and

he himself—he keenly remembered the deaths recently experienced by them all.

“That’s nothing you can pass off as mere stimulation. We really died... Over and over again...”

He had felt death’s cold embrace more than once. In the half year since visiting Onrai Island, he had experienced the annihilation of his teammates several times. No, he’d repeated the half year leading up to that annihilation over and over.

There was a clear contradiction in that, yet, there was no other way to explain the facts.

In the first place, it was a minor contradiction on top of the massive contradiction already present. After all, if Yukina’s words were to be believed, Kojou had been missing for only three days to begin with.

“We doth not truly believe that thou entered a game world, Sir Boyfriend. Had thou done so, thou wouldst look far more entertained.”

“So where did I go, then? Where is Onrai Island...?!”

When Lydianne calmly made that assertion, the glare Kojou gave her somehow seemed resentful.

If Kojou had merely been abducted, magic could have explained it any number of ways. Deceiving Itogami Island’s surveillance net and Yukina’s monitoring would be worthy of praise but wasn’t all that crucial.

Bothering Kojou far more than that were Shizuri and Yuno, who had been left behind on Onrai Island.

That very moment, Shizuri and Yuno were probably back in the *Carceri* where he’d left them. If possible, he wanted to return to Onrai Island that very moment and help them. He’d have time to think about inconsistencies in time perception and the identity of his kidnapper later.

“The Demon Sanctuary of...Onrai Island, huh...” Yaze stared at Kojou with a pitying look, his murmur somehow coming off as sarcastic. “No such island exists.”

“...It doesn’t exist? You mean, its actual name is something else?”

“Nah. I’m saying, the land you know as Onrai Island doesn’t exist anywhere in this world. That includes virtual reality on a network.”

“That’s crazy!” Kojou spat out as he watched Yaze slowly shake his head.

Onrai Island was no virtual world inside a game. Lydianne had acknowledged as much. However, he didn’t know what it meant that the place didn’t exist in the real world, either. If that was true, then what was the world that Kojou had been living in?

“That’s right... Himeragi! Himeragi, you know Onrai Island, right...?!”

Kojou vigorously whirled about and looked at her. It might have been for just a moment, but Yukina had appeared on the Onrai Island where Kojou had been, so she could attest to the island really existing.

Yukina bit her lip and, for some reason, vaguely shook her head.

“It is not Lady Sword Shaman of which thou should’st ask Onrai Island’s whereabouts, but Lady Empress,” Lydianne replied in place of the silent Yukina.

“Empress? You mean Asagi?”

“Indeed. ’Twas Lady Empress’s plan that sent Lady Sword Shaman into thy world.”

Lydianne made the statement with a small measure of pride. Yukina nodded silently, affirming her words.

“I was in touch with Asagi earlier, so she should be coming pretty soon, I think.”

Speaking those words, Yaze collected his own smartphone from Kojou’s hand.

Apparently, Yaze and the others had no intention of explaining anything else regarding Onrai Island’s true nature. Or perhaps they didn’t have a precise understanding to begin with.

“So I’d better ask Asagi for details in person, then. She understands the whole thing, I take it?”

“I suppose she does. And it would expend far less time than our giving a half-

formed explanation ourselves.”

For some reason, Yukina’s expression was stern with a tinge of worry. He felt like she’d been glancing at the clock over and over for a while.

“Besides, Senpai, before Aiba arrives, there is an important mission that remains for you to complete, you see.”

“...Mission?” Kojou muttered, feeling an ominous stirring within his chest.

Apparently, this mission was the reason the wounded Kojou had been brought to Saikai Academy rather than his own residence.

However, it was right after Kojou had returned from being spirited away. His wounds hadn’t healed yet. And aside from that, Kojou had Shizuri and Yuno on his mind, genuinely feeling like nothing else should come before that.

Even so, Kojou did not object to Yukina. He was simply overwhelmed by the force of her will.

Gazing at him straight-on, she quietly made a statement to him, her expression graver than ever before.

“Yes. It is a most severe test.”

Faced with her words, Kojou could do nothing but nod.

3

“Wait a—Mogwai...what is this?”

In the second underground stratum of Keystone Gate’s central block, Asagi was standing stiff and emotionless at the front entrance to the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

An unfamiliar vehicle was parked right in front of her. It was a small-scale ground-warfare weapon, its entire body painted a light shade of pink. It was round, looking much like a tortoise, with spherical tires on each of its four feet. Its main armament was a short-barreled, 84-mm low-recoil gun. Its secondary armaments were a pair of 5.56-mm machine guns and a host of others—

“Prototype Legged Tank Mk. VII, Suzuka. In firepower and armor protection, it

is inferior to the Hizamaru that li'l miss Tanker rides, but this one's mobility and electronic warfare gear is superior. The intake and exhaust system and the joints have been customized exclusively for Itogami Island's climate, too."

Somehow, Mogwai's voice sounded proud as it came from the smartphone Asagi gripped in her hand.

"I asked for a *taxi*! Who sent me a tank?!" Asagi exclaimed, pointing at the parked vehicle. Mogwai laughed without a shred of guilt.

"Keh-keh. This is faster than a taxi, you know. Don't worry, it's street legal."

"Aww whatever! There's no way I'm wearing that pilot suit, though!"

"In that case, how about this one? It's modified to be see-through with increased ventila—"

"Who would wear that?!"

Asagi howled as she glared at the school swimsuit pilot suit displayed on the smartphone's screen. Just driving around an urban area with a tank made her head hurt; she couldn't bear the thought of wearing such embarrassing clothes on top of that.

"Aww, geez! Motoki put you up to this, didn't he? I won't accept an escort, so he's going to make me ride a tank instead?"

"Correct. This island has been quite dangerous of late."

"Well, it's not like I don't see where he's coming from..."

Her voice thick with irritation, Asagi put a hand against the tank's armor. She climbed into the cockpit in the carapace portion, mindful of the hem of her skirt as she sat in the front-leaning, motorcycle-style seat.

Though she wasn't especially appreciative of the fact, Asagi, dubbed the Priestess of Cain, possessed a special nature. The magical calculations she employed subconsciously were the key to the forbidden, world-transforming spell known as The Cleansing.

That meant Asagi was an individual as dangerous as the Fourth Primogenitor—perhaps even more so.

After all, after obtaining the power of The Cleansing, Vattler had been able to slug it out with vampire primogenitors on better-than-equal terms and was on the verge of laying waste to the HGTO's multinational fleet all by himself.

Fortunately, few were aware of Asagi's true nature. That didn't mean they could be careless; now that The Cleansing had been proven to actually exist, various forces around the world had begun moving in search of the Priestess of Cain.

For that reason, Asagi had no logical grounds to complain about Yaze being considerate enough to give her the combat strength she required to defend herself.

That said, she couldn't help but feel that no matter how you sliced it, driving around the city in a pink robot tank made you stand out a bit too much.

"If you don't want bodyguards or a tank, there's one other way to deal with it, you know."

As if seeing right through Asagi's dismay, Mogwai spoke in a very sober tone of voice. It was right around the time the robot tank Asagi was driving was entering a highway in the direction of Island South.

"What do you mean?" she asked, interested but wary. Even she couldn't feign disinterest after hearing there was a way to be freed from that embarrassing tank.

"Keh-keh." Mogwai laughed at Asagi's reaction in an oddly human way.

"The gist is, you just need to gain the power to protect yourself, li'l miss. For example, an immortal body, inexhaustible demonic energy, stuff like that."

"The heck? Where am I gonna get something like that at this point? It's not like I'm a...vampire..."

Around the point where she was going to swat Mogwai's proposal as preposterous, Asagi audibly gasped.

Setting aside the exception of the Fourth Primogenitor, a supposedly man-made vampire, it was impossible for preexisting human beings to become vampires. However, there was a way to gain power on par with one.

“—Wait, don’t tell me, you’re saying I should become a vampire vassal?!”

“Well, if push comes to shove, being a vampire vassal means becoming my bro Kojou’s bride, I suppose,” Mogwai stated calmly.

A Blood Vassal, aka Blood Concubine—these were titles assigned to those that had made pacts with vampires, turning into their pseudo-vampire retainers.

Unlike a pureblood vampire, they could not summon Beast Vassals, but transforming into vassals granted them immortality and demonic energy on par with the vampire they served. Depending upon the abilities of the servant, they could even exceed their master in fighting strength.

On the other hand, becoming a vampire’s vassal meant spending eternity with one’s master. A pact with a vampire was also a fiendish curse.

Mogwai surely knew all that. Although from the tone of his voice, it sounded like nothing more than a tease.

“It’s not like it’s first come, first served, but you already have one rival in a provisional pact. I think it might be best to seduce him while you still can.”

“Th-this is silly! It’s not like I want to become his bride or anything el—”

Asagi’s voice went shrill as she violently pounded the pilot seat control panel. Mid-drive, the tank’s frame began to snake around dangerously, moving in accordance with its driver. Cars in motion swiftly altered course, making ferocious *screech* noises against the highway as horns honked in a chorus of protest.

“Calm down, li’l miss. Even if it’s on auto-pilot, thrashing around in the pilot seat is dangerous.”

“Whose fault do you think this is?! It’s because you’re saying stupid things like —”

Mogwai’s statement, like it was no thread off his back, made Asagi’s voice go ragged.

However, her rebuttal was interrupted by an impact that came without warning. The robot tank decelerated precipitously, making Asagi, lying upon the

seat, let out a yelp.

“What now?!”

“Enemy attack.”

“An enemy?!”

The odd seriousness in Mogwai’s voice made Asagi’s expression tighten.

Another brash skidding sound bellowed forth as the car trying to overtake Asagi swerved past. Its balance was heavily thrown off from trying to dodge the creepy monster that had appeared on the highway.

The car that had been behind her scratched against the guardrail, sparks raggedly scattering from its frame. Despite that, Asagi didn’t have the luxury of confirming the safety of the driver just then.

“Er, gross! The heck is that?!”

A bizarre shadow crawling on the roadway had taken Asagi and others by surprise.

Its form resembled that of a cat, but its hideously swollen body was more comparable to a tiger’s or a lion’s in size. In place of four legs, its body was supported by countless tentacles resembling those of a jellyfish.

“No body warmth, breathing, or heartbeat. Ah, it’s an animal corpse, huh,” Mogwai murmured with amusement as he used the robot tank’s sensors to scan the enemy.

Asagi’s cheek twitched. “A zombie? A necromancer’s familiar?”

“It’s not impossible...but ain’t no time to make sure. Incoming!”

“Geh?! Wait a... No! Don’t come this way!”

At the same time as Mogwai’s warning, the zombie sprinted toward her with unexpected speed.

Asagi reflexively threw the robot tank in reverse, removing the safety on the tactical AI. The artificial intelligence booted up, instantly engaging self-defense protocols. The two machine guns built into the sides of both forelegs spewed out a hail of bullets with incredible force.

Bathed in augmented, anti-demon rounds, the zombie was blown away in midair. Its remains fell to the ground, dissolving in the sunlight as they crumbled away.

“Th-that was surprisingly fragile.”

“The raw ingredient was a simple corpse, after all.”

Watching as the zombie remains faded into nothingness, Asagi patted her chest in relief.

She had no more than a second to remain calm.

A horde of zombies varying in both size and shape came over the fence along the side of the road one after another, assembling in an apparent effort to surround Asagi. All of a sudden, they numbered in the dozens, burying the entirety of the highway.

“These numbers are bad. If they keep adding more like this, our ammo won’t last.” Mogwai let out a whistle like he was downright pleased. The robot tank Suzuka came equipped with machine guns on the left and right with a hundred rounds each. Naturally, there was no spare ammunition. The number of rounds made the prospect of taking on a horde of monsters far from reassuring.

“Don’t tell me—Someone’s blocking my line of retreat...?!”

Realizing that the situation was manufactured by some caster’s insidious scheme, a nervous look came over Asagi’s face. She didn’t think mere zombies had enough attack power to breach the robot tank’s armor, but being surrounded was perilous.

After all, the possibility of the wheels slipping on the slippery zombies’ slime was significant, and she couldn’t even bear to look if torn bits of flesh packed themselves into the joints. More than that, she really didn’t want to get any closer to the creatures. The wall of flesh created by the creepy monsters posed a far more effective threat than she would have ever imagined.

“What’ll you do, li’l miss? If you’re gonna break through, isn’t now the time?”

“You’re telling me to drive through that horde?! There’s no way I can do that! No! Way!”

Letting a shout mixed with a scream, Asagi fired a barrage from the machine guns.

A dazzling light surrounded the tank's front legs as bullets rushed forward. These vermilion particles included minute magical symbols in their interior. This radiance was the world-altering, forbidden spell of the Sinful God—The Cleansing.

The vermilion bullets punched through the zombies, transforming them into white clumps of salt. The Cleansing was a spell to rewrite the world. The zombies had not been changed into salt per se; it was the very fact zombies existed there that had been changed. Though Asagi could not use magic herself, she was able to draw out the power of The Cleansing to some extent through using the robot tank as a catalyst. Even if it was a far cry from the proper power of The Cleansing, it was plenty for taking on zombies.

With the zombie ring broken, a path paved with white salt was formed. The surviving zombies could not enter this road of salt. Salt was highly moisture absorbent, so it robbed the zombies' slime of its water, hindering them from taking action.

“Let's run for it, Mogwai!”

Asagi charged the robot tank toward an opening in the circle. Scattering salt crystals all around, she accelerated while shaking the zombies off her tail.

“Wait, li'l miss! Somebody's there!”

“Say what?!”

Mogwai's warning made Asagi's expression freeze. The wheels gripped the rough, salty surface as the robot tank came to a rapid halt.

Standing in the center of the highway, gazing at Asagi's tank, was a girl in strange clothing.

She was wearing a long wimple as if she was a nun and a long, embroidered coat evocative of a knight from the Middle Ages. She carried a mace on her back and a long sword on her hip.

“Don't tell me... That girl is the caster controlling the zombies...?!” Asagi let

out a bewildered murmur as she glared at the girl shown by her monitor.

The girl had long, white hair and blue eyes. She was a beautiful girl straight out of some sort of fantasy game, but in that situation, Asagi couldn't think of the girl as anything more than a cosplayer.

The girl's expression remained as hard as ice as she drew her long sword. Its beautiful blade flickered like flames, surrounded by a crimson light.

"That sword...!"

Feeling fear she could not put into words, Asagi ordered the tank to evade. The robot tank painfully screeched as it rapidly retreated.

"Mogwai, shield!"

"Aye, aye."

At the same time the sarcastic AI signaled comprehension, the area around the tank glowed red. A pyramidal bulwark was deployed with the tank at its center, transforming the pursuing zombies into harmless clumps of salt.

However, the sight in no way altered the expression of the girl presumably controlling those zombies. She quietly raised her long sword high, swinging it down silently and without fanfare.

A high-pitched sound like glass cracking reverberated, and the vermilion pyramid vanished.

"Wha...?" Asagi muttered, her breath catching.

"What the heck's with that sword?! It broke through a Cleansing bulwark?!"

"Feels less like breaking through it than...consuming the magical energy itself?" Mogwai sounded deeply intrigued.

The blade belonging to the long sword wielded by the girl was clearly glowing brighter since slicing the bulwark apart. Just as Mogwai had said, her weapon had consumed the magical energy of The Cleansing.

"This isn't the time for rational analysis! Prepare stun rounds! Hurry!"

Asagi gave rapid-fire orders to the tank's tactical AI. Naturally, even she lacked the courage to fire live rounds at a human being.

However, switching tank weapons created a momentary opening, whereupon the white-haired girl closed the distance with Asagi all at once. Still holding the long sword in her right hand, she drew her mace from her back with the left.

The robot tank's sensors reacted to the explosives packed into the mace, sounding a flurry of alarms. It was a direct blow to deliver explosives at point-blank range—these were anti-tank tactics employing flesh-and-blood infantry.

“E-evade!!”

Asagi tried to pull the tank back, but the girl's attack was swifter. The silver mace made direct impact with the tank's flank. The lightweight fiber-reinforced plastic armor was pulverized as the mace's flange plunged in.

Right after the girl abandoned the mace and moved away, a flash burst on the tank's surface.

The blast blew into the tank's interior. The frame was tossed like a rubber ball crashing into the guardrail. It was by no means an enormous explosion, but it was plenty to render the tank nonfunctional.

“Mogwai...! Mogwai, can you hear me?!”

Squished by impact-absorbent airbags, Asagi earnestly called out to her partner, but Mogwai gave no response. High-performance that he was, he was still an AI in the end. The interior of the thoroughly wrecked tank had no electronic devices left for him to control.

The cockpit hatch opened wide, nearly blown off its hinges. The robot tank falling into an inactive state had caused its safety measures to activate.

Coolant gushed out to douse the flames, surrounding the tank with a dense mist.

Emerging from that mist was the girl gripping the crimson long sword. Without a sound, she landed on top of the tank, gazing down indifferently at the immobile Asagi.

Without a word, she raised her sword high. Still buried in airbags, Asagi had no way of dodging the attack. She bit her lip, resigning herself to death.

But as the white-haired girl tried to swing down her sword, it strongly

bounced off, as if obstructed by some invisible wall.

“Sorry, but could I have you stay your hand against her?”

A teasing voice could be heard from over Asagi and the other girl’s heads. It was an alto voice that felt transparent. The distinct color of wariness became present in the white-haired girl’s previously indifferent eyes.

“She’s a precious friend of mine, you see—”

Before the end of that murmur, even, the air creaked and an annoying *ting* rang in her ears. Air warped and pressurized within an artificial space to form an invisible shock wave.

A shock wave cannonball shot out, assaulting the white-haired girl gripping the long sword.

Even the girl’s sword, which consumed magical energy, could not rend a mass of air. The descending shock wave poured down like rain, making the girl’s coat flutter as she retreated. She leaped skillfully over the highway’s guardrail, vanishing from sight under the elevated structure. At some point, the zombies she controlled had vanished from sight as well.

“A remarkable retreat. Pursuit might prove rather difficult.”

Murmuring in apparent praise, a figure stood atop a lamppost with the sun to its back. It was a slender, androgynous silhouette. Heedless of the unreliable footing, the figure’s eyes narrowed as they confirmed Asagi was safe.

“You’re...Kojou’s...!”

Crawling out from the airbags, Asagi looked up and gaped.

Fondly looking back as Asagi did so, *she* smiled amiably.

4

“...What’s the meaning of this?”

Kojou Akatsuki clutched his head as he stared at the printouts spread atop the desk. Long pieces of text in a foreign language and complex mathematical proofs decorated the sheets. They were exams for English and math.

Yukina had said she had an important mission for him, and this is where she had led him—a classroom with problems to answer.

“It is precisely what it looks like: supplemental exams. Is that a problem?” Natsuki grumbled while Kojou took his sweet time internalizing the current situation.

Natsuki was dressed in the usual extravagant, frilly dress. However, the clearly unenthused expression on her face was doubtlessly related to being at school on a Sunday. She was the supplemental exam monitor on her long-awaited day off; small wonder she was in a sour mood.

Although Kojou could say the same for himself, having to take supplemental exams he had not desired.

“Err, they explained the situation to you, right? That I spent the last half year with amnesia on this Onrai Island place, and I only got back this morning, right?”

“Those are the circumstances solely from your perspective, yes?”

Speaking with a flat voice, Natsuki shot Kojou a look of visible scorn.

“The objective fact remains, you skipped end-of-semester exams while spending the last three days in unauthorized absence. Incidentally, if you fail these exams you will be in the same class as your little sister.”

“Meaning I’ll repeat the year?! Shit!”

Are you a demon? cursed the voice he dared not raise aloud as he shifted his gaze to the exam problems.

Kojou’s younger sister, Nagisa Akatsuki, was in her third year of middle school. If he wasn’t careful, he would fail the grade and have to repeat his first year of high school, meaning he would be in the same grade as his younger sister.

“What a handful,” said Natsuki with a sigh, languidly leaning against her chair. It was an antique with arms and legs ill-suited to a high school classroom. Natsuki remained sitting in it as a homunculus girl in a maid outfit brought her a poured cup of tea.

“To think the ruler of a Dominion would flunk a grade. It makes you wonder about the future of Itogami.”

“I haven’t even taken the exams yet...!” Kojou objected in a quiet voice as he worked on translating English text into Japanese. It was long and dealt with current affairs. Three days prior, Kojou surely would have been unable to raise hand or foot against it.

However, even as Kojou worried, he somehow managed to read and comprehend the difficult problem. His unexpectedly valiant efforts brought a plainly dubious expression over his exam monitor, Natsuki. She turned her gaze toward Yukina and Yaze, who were waiting in a corner of the classroom, as if to say, *That’s impossible*, suspecting Kojou of cheating. Yukina and Yaze, under suspicion of being coconspirators, hastily shook their heads.

“I told you earlier, sheesh. I have a half year of extra study under my belt. First-year high school problems are cake, especially English. Her Royal Highness the paladin really worked me over for that.”

An oddly wounded expression came over Kojou as he vindicated himself. To Kojou, the half year—or longer—he had spent upon Onrai Island was an unmistakable fact. He had undergone horrible experiences more than once or twice, but that didn’t mean all his experiences were meaningless.

“Hmph, a Paladin of Gisella...you say?” Natsuki gave off a little snort, looking at Kojou with a grave expression.

“Huh?” Kojou lifted his face in surprise.

“Ms. Minamiya, you know about Gisella?” Yukina asked, bewildered.

“The nun paladin... Er, didn’t Kojou just imagine that?” Yaze said, rather rudely, Kojou thought.

Natsuki grimaced a little, regretting saying anything. Perhaps weary of Kojou and the others’ gazes, she sighed briefly before opening her mouth.

“Gisella is a minor branch of the Lotharingian Orthodox Church. In other words, it is known as a heretical faction.”

“...Lotharingian?”

Kojou's eyes widened a bit at the term he remembered hearing before. He certainly was surprised, but it was far from unbelievable. Now that Natsuki mentioned it, from the design of her beloved coat to her oddly obstinate personality, Shizuri did resemble a certain Lotharingian Armed Apostle known to Kojou.

"The Lotharingian Orthodox Church is distinguished by the worship of saints. Holy men that saved multitudes and heroes that earned honor in battle against demons and so forth are extolled and worshipped as saints. Of course, to a lesser or greater extent, commonalities can be seen between this form of religion and others in every corner of the globe."

"So it would seem," Kojou acknowledged with a grimace.

He'd had few opportunities to appreciate it during the time he'd lived in a Demon Sanctuary, but even to the present day, in many nations and lands demons were still feared as a danger to humankind.

It was a conflicted feeling for a vampire primogenitor to have, but he very much understood why people would fear demons. Put simply, many demons had physical abilities that outstripped those of humankind, hence why people admired those that could oppose Demonkind as saints.

"But you said Gisella is a heresy, right?" he asked, feeling a faint tug on his mind from what Natsuki had said.

She quietly nodded. "To the Lotharingian Orthodox Church that worships saints, demons are an evil existence that should be destroyed. After all, those who would claim to be just require an enemy so as to prove the justice of their cause."

"And demons are easy to paint as villains, huh?" This time, Kojou made a distinctly sour face.

For the sake of their own side's advantage, people engaged in hatred and strife with enemies of their own creation. Eventually, the original objective was long forgotten, leaving only the hatred and strife. It wasn't limited to humans and demons. It was a common occurrence all across the world.

"But Gisella's creed was different. They asserted that demons ought to be

given guidance and converted. Then, they would cease to be the enemy of humanity.”

“That feels pretty bad, too, like being looked down upon.”

Kojou stuck his cheek against his hand in dismay. Natsuki did not outright disagree with him. Though she was technically a teacher, she surely had her own personal thoughts on Gisella’s creed. *Guidance* had a nice ring to it, but teachers were in a position to impose their value system on students when not careful.

That said, Gisella’s thinking, which did not view demons as evil, certainly did not strike Kojou as unpleasant. If anything, it was closest to the value system of a Demon Sanctuary resident.

“If I was to appraise Gisella based on a single point, it would be that the group’s assertions weren’t simply hot air,” Natsuki said, elegantly raising her teacup. “As a matter of fact, they continuously acted to protect demons oppressed in conflict zones and in regions where discrimination remained pronounced.”

Kojou let out a breath of admiration. Certainly, that was conduct that could be assigned value...and dangerous conduct at that.

“Naturally, many groups were less than thrilled by this,” she continued. “Of course that went for the armies of various nations at odds with demons, but ferocious criticism also poured in from their brethren in the other branches of the Lotharingian Orthodox Church. In some cases, they and the demons they protected came under attack, leading to numerous casualties.”

“So that’s what you meant by heresy...”

Kojou’s fist trembled as he was seized by indignation.

A difference in dogma had led to groups killing one another. This, too, was a common occurrence throughout the world.

Gisella was not wrong in trying to protect demons, but Kojou also understood the hatred that people risking their lives to fight demons bore toward Gisella.

It wasn’t an issue that could be resolved with violent words such as *justice* or

evil.

“To protect their members and demons from such hostile forces, Gisella came to view as necessary that it, too, needed to be armed. Gisella’s area of operations was always on the front lines of a war. Consequently, this raised powerful warriors honed through live combat... Ironical, isn’t it?”

Natsuki smiled thinly. Kojou forgot his anger and stared intently at her.

“Wait, those warriors, don’t tell me they’re...”

Natsuki nodded dispassionately. “Yes, the Paladins of Gisella.”

Kojou wearily exhaled. “So that’s what it was.”

The lofty pride she had borne toward her title of paladin. The burning tenacity with which she observed Kojou to the point of being bizarre. And her oddly busybody nature: When he considered how Gisella came to be, everything about Shizuri’s personality suddenly made sense.

Yukina, who had been quietly listening up to that point, spoke up. “If Gisella actually exists as an organization, they should prove quite useful for ascertaining Miss Kasugaya’s identity.”

“I see. All we have to do is talk directly to these Gisella people and ask, right?” Yaze immediately pulled his smartphone out. No doubt he intended to order someone in the Gigafloat Management Corporation to contact Gisella.

Natsuki gazed at the pair and quietly shook her head.

“Unfortunately, that will not be possible.”

“Why not? Because Gisella is some kind of secret organization like the Lion King Agency?” Kojou glanced back at Natsuki, perplexed.

“A special government agency,” corrected Yukina.

“Certainly, Gisella has no reason to hide the identity of its paladins,” Natsuki said dismissively.

“Then—”

“But it won’t work. Gisella no longer exists,” Natsuki calmly declared, seemingly chiding Kojou for his fervor.

“Wait... What?”

“Until six years ago, Gisella’s headquarters was located within the European Demon Sanctuary of Iroise.”

“Demon Sanctuary of...Iroise...?” Kojou repeated, shocked.

It wasn’t that her words were surprising in themselves. Gisella’s objective was to protect demons. If so, basing their headquarters in a Demon Sanctuary made sense. After all, Demon Sanctuaries weren’t limited to Itogami Island; they were built with the objective of coexistence between humans and demons the world over.

What made Kojou feel bewildered was toward the place being called Iroise.

Kojou knew the name of that city from somewhere. He’d heard Natsuki say the name before.

Yukina knew, too. “Tartarus Lapse...”

The word linked Kojou’s memories together.

“Right... Tartarus Lapse! The European Demon Sanctuary of Iroise—that’s the name of the city Takehito Senga and his people destroyed six years ago...!”

“It seems that most of Gisella’s members remained in Iroise until the very end, exhausting all efforts to rescue the citizens. As a result, it was too late for them to flee. The organization was annihilated. There are no surviving Paladins of Gisella...as far as I am aware, at least.”

Natsuki’s tone of voice was gentle, lending it the heavy ring of truth all the more.

“They were...wiped out...”

Kojou’s shaky gaze loitered about. Natsuki’s explanation added up. She had no reason to deceive him. Gisella truly no longer existed.

In spite of that, Kojou didn’t think Shizuri had lied to him. She’d most certainly called herself a Paladin of Gisella, and there was no inconsistency between her words and actions. Or had Shizuri already died, meaning that what Kojou had seen was her ghost—?

What's the meaning of this? Kojou asked himself, his expression that of a man adrift.

"This idle talk has gone on long enough. There are still twenty-five minutes until your English exam is finished."

Natsuki produced a golden pocket watch, the tone of her voice suddenly changing as she spoke.

Her unexpected words brought a ferocious "Geh!" out of Kojou. Apparently, she'd totally counted the time taken up by their conversation just then against the time allotted for the exam. That she'd gone out of her way to warn him naturally meant she had no intention of extending that time. It was atrocious behavior from someone who'd spoken a fair deal in that conversation.

And what remained before Kojou's hands were virtually untouched answer sheets.

What's the heck is going on? lamented Kojou, sighing once more as he felt like he'd been slapped.

5

Astarte, who'd left the classroom earlier, returned right after Kojou somehow managed to wrap up his supplemental English exam and was digging into math problems with no time for a break.

"Master, there is an emergency call for you."

The tray the homunculus girl carried had a fresh cup of black tea, two cookies, and a small communication device upon it. It was an encrypted communicator for federal Attack Mages.

"Hmm."

Natsuki glanced at its screen before surveying the classroom. Kojou was in the middle of calculating the simultaneous equation inequalities forming the cliff that could bar him from the next grade. Yukina, his watcher, was slouched against a classroom wall and sound asleep, perhaps from considerable exhaustion. Beside her, Yaze and Lydianne were playing a card game. In a sense,

it was a very peaceful scene.

“Astarte. I leave this place to you. Strictly deal with any irregularities.”

“Accepted.”

Astarte affirmed her master Natsuki’s rather roundabout orders.

Grasping one of the cookies Astarte had brought in, Natsuki headed out of the classroom. It was Kojou who called her to a halt.

“Natsuki?”

“Forget it. There is nothing to be gained by you paying attention. Don’t think.”

Did something happen? asked the look on Kojou’s face, but Natsuki bluntly blew him off.

“I can’t stop thinking in the middle of an exam, sheesh...”

What teacher talks to a pupil like that? sulked Kojou to himself, resting his cheek against his palm. Then, when Kojou lifted his face once more, Natsuki had elegantly vanished from sight.

A gunfight had broken out inside the warehouse. It was an old cargo warehouse on the far edges of Island East.

EVENT MANAGEMENT CORPORATION was written on the sign. As fronts for frequently hauling in cargo without arousing suspicion went, you could do worse.

Engaged in the firefight was the Island Guard’s SWAT team under the command of a federal Attack Mage police inspector. The Island Guard was superior in numbers and firepower, but the situation was most certainly not to their advantage. Sorcerous criminals holed up in the warehouse were employing powerful offensive spells. That was probably the reason they’d sent a request for Natsuki to render support.

Jumping into the warehouse via teleportation, Natsuki walked right into the middle of the battle.

The besieged sorcerous criminals numbered seven in total. By modern standards, the spells they used were dangerous and inefficient—not to mention vile.



They employed powerful miasma that corroded metal and a mind-control spell for causing indiscriminate panic.

Each of the casters gripped old grimoires with thick, heavy binding.

“LCO sorcerers, is it?” Natsuki exhaled in tedium as she pegged the sorcerous criminals’ nature.

The Library of Criminal Organizations—aka the LCO. They were a group of sorcerers with the objective of collecting and studying large quantities of forbidden grimoires said to spread calamity.

For a time, they boasted tremendous influence around the world, but a betrayal by their leader, Aya Tokoyogi, had dealt a serious blow, leaving them weakened. Having already lost many of their most crucial members on Itogami Island, their kind surely came to see the land as abominable.

“After being humiliated by Aya, I thought you’d tuck in your tails and run, yet here you are crawling back out of the woodwork. What, did you think you could sneak by right after Itogami Island’s newly gained independence?”

Without fanfare, Natsuki waved the fan in her hand toward the sorcerers chanting their spells. An invisible shock wave mercilessly slammed into the enemy. The miasma inside the warehouse cleared; the intensity of the Island Guard side’s attacks increased.

“Attack Mage Minamiya!”

An inspector she recognized noticed Natsuki and rushed over to her. A conflicted expression came over him, mixing a cringe over his jurisdiction being infringed with unconcealable relief.

“Did he say Natsuki Minamiya...?!”

“The Witch of the Void?!”

Murmurs ran between the holed-up sorcerers. To them, Natsuki, the one who’d captured Aya Tokoyogi and creator of the cause of LCO’s downfall, was a symbol of hatred and fear.

“Take your wounded and fall back. I can deal with this by myself,” Natsuki ordered the inspector.

For an instant, the inspector blanched, but he did not attempt to object. He knew that Natsuki was right.

All view of the Attack Mage, clad in her elegant dress, vanished as she seemed to melt into thin air.

A moment later, she appeared in the center of the besieged sorcerers.

Silver chains shot out at every angle, blasting through the sorcerers as they stood petrified. The chains proceeded to entwine them, robbing them of their freedom to act. It was all over in a single instant. As the sorcerers let out anguished voices and fell to the floor, Natsuki fixed them with a glare of disgust, as if she was looking at houseflies.

“So fragile. Even with the LCO weakened, I would have thought they could send more fighting strength into the field than this...”

Confirming that the sorcerers had been neutralized, the Island Guard members walked into the back of the warehouse. In contrast to the relieved smiles coming over each of them, Natsuki’s expression remained clouded. The lack of tenacity from the LCO sorcerers weighed on her mind.

Natsuki’s train of thought was broken by the fearful voices coming from the apprehended sorcerers.

“U...UWAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“Wha...?!”

“What’s wrong with them?!”

Even the members of the Island Guard were so unnerved that their legs became wobbly. That was how bizarre the sight unfolding before them was.

Countless shadows were crawling out of the darkness at the back of the warehouse. This was a horde of decaying, swollen, strange-looking beasts. Vestiges of various animals, such as dogs, birds, and fish, remained, but not a single one had retained its original shape. Dozens of individual bodies had merged to form a single mass pushing its way into the warehouse.

“L...Larvae?! It can’t be! Why, Great Librarian?! We are your LCO brethren—!” screamed one of the sorcerers, rolling onto the floor with a pitiable expression.

The Island Guard turned toward the oncoming monsters and began firing at them. However, the monsters that had been called Larvae did not halt their incursion. The slippery, glowing, viscous shadow swallowed up the immobile sorcerers and began to digest their flesh.

“I see. These are expendable pawns. The objective is the destruction of evidence.”

Sourly narrowing her eyes, Natsuki waved the fan in her right hand.

The surrounding space made a ripple-like shimmer and spat out little teddy bears one after another. Gray. Brown. Pastel blue. Polka dot. Checkered. Stuffed animals of various colors formed a line without a single thread out of place and rushed the Larva horde. In reality, the bears were Natsuki’s familiars—*bombs* that Natsuki had created with magical energy.

The Larvae had been pushed back only a few short meters when Natsuki detonated her familiars one after the next. The scale of the explosions was small, but the force was plenty to blow away Larvae, nothing more than zombies in the end. Moreover, the familiars overwhelmed them by sheer numbers.

The Larvae were thoroughly turned into scorched pieces of flesh, steaming white as they vanished. Only the members of the Island Guard, seemingly beside themselves, and the wounded sorcerers remained behind.

“Now, then. It seems that you have been abandoned by your superior. Do you still have the morale to put up resistance?”

Natsuki coldly levied her question toward one of the sorcerers openly weeping from fear and the pain of his wounds. The sorcerer continued to sob, but even so, he desperately shook his head. Naturally, he understood full well that he would have been killed had Natsuki not blown the Larvae away.

“Now, then, will you hand over the cargo you smuggled in?”

Natsuki posed the question in a voice bereft of emotion. One of the sorcerers, still bound by silver chains, used his barely free left hand to point at a machine standing nearby.

It had a cheap, plastic exterior and a very loud color scheme. It was a large-

sized game cabinet like those one would see at a game center or an amusement park.

“Are you toying with us...?!”

“You’ve got a lot of guts,” growled the Attack Mage inspector, wrenching the wailing sorcerer up by his collar.

“No, it’s true! The Great Librarian... The Witch of the Dusk ordered us not to hand this machine over to anyone!”

The sorcerer retorted in a voice with a sob mixed in. The desperate look on his face sent the inspector into silence. His demeanor suggested he did not know how to process that information.

“The Witch of the Dusk...is it? I see now,” Natsuki murmured purely to herself. Her eyes somehow seemed visibly amused as they gazed at the game cabinet that had been sitting in the warehouse gathering dust for those last three days.

6

“Time is up.”

The homunculus girl’s monotone voice echoed throughout the closed classroom.

The needles of the clock indicated it was 11:50 AM. The time allotted for Kojou’s supplemental exams had come to an end.

“It’s...over...”

Kojou, who had somehow managed to finish all the problems, slumped onto the table, motionless.

To begin with, it hadn’t even been six hours since Kojou had been recovered from Itogami Island’s beach. Dragged to school without a clue what was going on, he’d had supplemental exams out of the blue. On top of that, he’d heard the true nature of Gisella; Kojou’s brain was on the verge of overheating.

For the time being, he didn’t want to think about anything complex. He knew he couldn’t do that, though.

“Submission of answer sheets confirmed. You will be informed of supplementary test results after two days.”

Whether she was aware of Kojou’s mental anguish or not, Astarte’s statement was businesslike to the very end. With a neutral look on her face, she checked the test papers that she had collected. The only thing Kojou and the others could do beyond that point...was pray.

“Senpai, you have worked very hard.”

Kojou fell into a state of despondency as Yukina’s voice called out to him. It probably wasn’t just Kojou’s imagination that her expression looked a smidgen brighter.

She might have felt responsible as his watcher for him being backed to the brink of failing a grade, or perhaps it was simply that her lack of sleep had been alleviated.

“Himeragi, you fine with being awake this soon?” Kojou asked, genuinely concerned for her.

Maybe she was trying to keep him from noticing, but even to Kojou it was plain as day Yukina had been sleeping during the exams.

“To what do you refer? Not that I am particularly short on sleep, but I shall have you know that Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency receive training so that they may continue acting for ninety-six hours with neither rest nor sleep —”

“You’ve got a mark on you.”

Kojou pointed at Yukina’s left cheek as he conveyed the minimum information necessary. Plain as day, Yukina had a mark on her cheek from the arm she had used as her pillow while she had been sound asleep.

Yukina’s face turned bright red and she fell into silence.

“How are your wounds, Kojou?” Yaze asked in her place with a pained smile.

“Well, I’m all right somehow. An all-out sprint would be asking a little much, though.”

Kojou subconsciously touched his left breast as he replied. He was

accustomed to pain, but he couldn't hope for a wound made by Snowdrift Wolf impaling him to dramatically heal in such a short time. Furthermore, wounds via Snowdrift Wolf impeded him from summoning his Beast Vassals. Kojou knew that from past experience.

That said, it wasn't a wound on a level that hindered day-to-day life. That was no doubt thanks to Yukina having missed his vitals.

"Let's go grab something to eat, then, hm? Asagi should be arriving anytime now."

Yaze checked the clock as he spoke. His words made Kojou realize just how empty his stomach was. Kojou's last meal had been before entering the hot spring in the *Carceri*.

At present, Kojou did not really know if the *Carceri* truly existed or not. The girl supposedly able to explain that had yet to arrive at Saikai Academy.

"Come to think of it, Asagi's kinda late," Kojou murmured.

It had already been over three hours since Yaze had sent word to her.

However, Yaze nodded without any particular sign of nervousness.

"Yeah. Seems like there was some sort of trouble with her tank midway."

"...Trouble?"

Kojou's eyebrows wavered with worry. He didn't ask, *Why is Asagi riding a tank in the middle of the city?* He felt like it was a little late to be asking *that*.

"I sent Lidy-Lady to go get her, so I don't think there's any need to worry. Whatever might happen along the way—"

Yaze immediately stopped. He held his favorite headphones to an ear as a grave expression came over him that he never showed others under normal circumstances.

"...Yaze?"

"We have a guest. One woman. And she's armed." Yaze looked like he was gazing far into the distance as he clicked his tongue in disgust.

Kojou's expression tightened as well. "Armed? Wait, are you saying she's

gonna attack our school?”

With it being Sunday, there were virtually no students on campus save for a few involved in club activities. If someone was coming to attack, odds were 80 to 90 percent that the target was Kojou.

“Senpai!”

Yukina’s warning reverberated through the classroom before Kojou could grasp the situation. She drew a spell tablet from the pocket of her school uniform, hurling it like a shuriken.

The spell tablet changed form in midair, transforming into a silver wolf. It was a metallic *shikigami*.

The wolf sailed over Kojou’s head, moving toward a window with a veranda right outside.

There stood a single, blue-black shadow. It was as if two lizards had been forcibly fused together to form a two-headed, eight-legged reptile. Its body was rotting, swollen until its form had become especially unsettling.

Kojou and the others stared straight at it as it climbed over the sill of the open window. Its bulging eyeballs darted to and fro as if it was monitoring Kojou and the others.

Yukina’s *shikigami* attacked the monster with lightning speed. Rent by ritual-energy-infused claws, the monster’s body burst into pieces. The scattered, flying pieces of flesh twitched for a while, but finally turned to smoke under the sunlight and vanished.

“...What the heck was that thing?” Yaze asked, disgusted, as he stepped on a not-yet-dissolved piece of flesh with his indoor shoe.

Yukina seemed at a loss as to whether she should return the *shikigami* to a spell tablet and recover it. She no doubt hesitated to touch a spell tablet covered in a monster’s blood spatter with her bare hand.

Belatedly, Kojou spoke the monster’s name. “Larva...”

“Larv... What?” Yaze blinked with a suspicious look in his eyes.

“A type of zombie. Supposedly an animal corpse that’s animated from

demonic energy in the *Carceri*.”

“*Carceri*... Wait, you don’t mean...?” Yaze’s eyes flew wide open.

No doubt Yaze was just as surprised as anyone that a monster from Onrai Island, a place that supposedly didn’t exist, had appeared in the real world.

Yukina calmly explained, “This was no naturally occurring undead. It was faint, but I sensed it was receiving some kind of directional ritual energy.”

Kojou’s expression became grave.

“Meaning that someone was controlling it?”

“Then the objective was recon. We’ve been found out,” Yaze said, pressing his headphones over both his ears.

Kojou didn’t know what basis he had for declaring that, but he figured those headphones had something to do with it.

“Maybe someone’s after me...!”

“Well, in this situation, it’d be difficult to assume any other reason,” Yaze said.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right...”

What a chore, thought Kojou, genuinely irritated for a second, but he immediately switched gears. *If there’s trouble coming either way, better it come straight at me*, he reasoned.

That went double since someone had been controlling the Larva. He had a mountain of questions he wanted to pose to the assailant.

“Do you know the intruder’s location?” Yukina asked as she drew her silver spear from her beloved guitar case.

“She’s just coming through the service entrance onto the school grounds. Given the time, the possibility of bumping into other students is low...but what are you gonna do?”

Yaze shifted his eyes to the windows on the corridor side. Kojou took the latter question to mean *Is it better to lie in ambush inside the classroom or head outside to smack her around there?*

Kojou volunteered without hesitation. “I’ll go. Our location’s been exposed

anyway.”

Without knowing the opponent’s identity, no effective plans could be formed, and you can’t surprise attack someone who knows your location. Leisurely waiting for the enemy to approach would be futile. Besides, every single one of Kojou’s Beast Vassals would prove useless in the cramped confines of the building.

“Concur. I shall apprehend the intruder in Master Minamiya’s place.”

Rather surprisingly, it was Astarte who straight-up agreed with Kojou’s opinion.

Astarte, a homunculus under protective custody and observation, had a duty placed upon her to obey Natsuki’s orders. It was to her that Natsuki had given the vague orders of *I leave this place to you*. As a result, Astarte had apparently taken the absent Natsuki’s duty to preserve public order within the school as her own. Here, maintaining public order meant disposing of the intruder.

“Understood. I’ll handle evacuating the students on my end. I’d have left Lidy-Lady here if I knew this was gonna happen.”

Yaze grudgingly accepted Kojou and Astarte’s plan of action. Lidy-Lady no doubt meant Lydianne. Lydianne herself was the powerless elementary schooler she appeared to be, but her robot tank was incredibly strong. Though having something like that go on a rampage within school grounds posed problems of its own.

“I shall go on ahead.”

“Eh? Astarte... Er, hey!”

Before Kojou could stop her, Astarte headed for the window in the corridor. Leaping out of the windowsill from the school building’s third floor, she landed on the ground. Translucent wings spread from the back of her maid outfit, absorbing the blow from the fall.

“Senpai, let us go as well.”

Having drawn her silver spear from her guitar case, Yukina followed Astarte without hesitation. Deftly turning in midair like a cat, she landed without so

much as a sound or a wobble. She'd probably enhanced her physical capabilities with ritual energy. She even demonstrated the luxury of firmly holding down her pleated skirt.

"Aww, crap! No choice but to go...!"

Kojou was practically in tears as he followed after Yukina and Astarte. Now that his body had become that of a vampire, that kind of height was no big deal at all, but logic didn't make scary things any less scary.

As Kojou performed a relatively disjointed landing, Astarte spoke in a voice with little intonation. "Warning. Approach of undead designated as Larvae confirmed."

"Larvae...in these numbers...!" Yukina exclaimed, looking around the schoolyard. The pathway leading to the service entrance was seemingly buried under a horde of creepy undead pressing closer. They were based on mouse corpses in such bad taste that the very sight of them made one want to retch. Naturally, even Yukina could not conceal her unrest.

"Pull back, Himeragi. You too, Astarte." Kojou raised his right hand as he stepped to the fore. "Sheesh."

He was not using his Beast Vassals. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, said to rival natural disasters, specialized mainly in wiping out large armies and engaging in mass destruction. Using them in a place like that would draw attention, and the facilities within school grounds would not escape unscathed. What was needed was not a Beast Vassal, but a tiny fragment of the demonic energy one possessed—

"Eh...?!"

He saw Yukina gape, for what Kojou gripped in his right hand was the spell tablet that Yukina had purportedly left in the classroom forgotten. It was not Yukina, but Kojou pouring demonic power in, which transformed the spell tablet into a *shikigami*—one with the form of a lion enshrouded by pale lightning.

Kojou's *shikigami* manifested for but a single moment.

Transforming into a beam, it assaulted the horde of Larvae; the next instant, it

burst apart, seemingly exploding from the inside out. The *shikigami* had no doubt been unable to withstand Kojou's vast demonic energies.

In the span of that single instant, the horde of Larvae had been wiped out. Before it burned up and dissipated, Kojou's *shikigami* had torn dozens of Larvae apart.

"Well, that's that."

Kojou gazed at the steaming pile of Larvae remains, exhaling with relief. After all, the *shikigami* had only materialized for a single moment, and it wasn't like he was capable of precise control. It wasn't something particularly praiseworthy at all, but since the immediate objective had been accomplished, he supposed it counted as a success.

"Senpai...just now...?!" she exclaimed, eyes blinking wide.

He couldn't fault her for being surprised. Even if it was a ritual accomplished by pure force of demonic energy, Kojou had used a spell.

"I told you. For half a year, I've been training as an Attack Mage. Well, not that I was able to use a single spell right up to the very end..."

Kojou bore a distinctly awkward expression as he spoke. It was Rui who had taught him the fundamentals of magic, including how to control a *shikigami*. He was keenly aware of just how unsophisticated his own spell had been.

"It can't be... You really did train on Onrai Island...?" Yukina was in a daze.

However, Kojou did not reply to her question.

He had noticed the sight of the assailant stepping past the remains of the Larvae and drawing near. It was a white-haired girl carrying a long sword.

The sight of her brought Kojou to a halt, as if it had sent an electric jolt running through him.

"That's crazy... *You're* the one controlling the Larvae...?!"

Kojou blanched and shook his head. He could not comprehend what was happening.

The girl was clad in a long coat adorned with armor in various places. Pure-

white hair spilled out under the long wimple she wore. She had a refined face and blue eyes.

The girl was gripping a crimson long sword that resembled a flame—Hauras.

“Cas, why—?!!”

Shizuri Kasugaya looked back at the shouting Kojou with a neutral expression, her sword at the ready.

The undulating, crimson blade coldly reflected the light of the sun.

7

“Presence of armed intruder confirmed. Right to self-defense activated under Homunculus Protective Custody Conditions: Special Exemption Clause Number Two.”

Astarte’s monotone voice echoed across the schoolyard. A pair of nearly transparent wings spread from her slender back clad in a maid outfit once more. These gradually transformed into a set of arms—that of a huge, humanoid Beast Vassal.

“Execute, Rhododactylos.”

A translucent golem appeared, swallowing Astarte. She was the world’s one and only artificial, experimental Beast Vassal symbiote. She was a homunculus controlling a Beast Vassal.

In her Beast Vassal armor, Astarte stepped in front of the enemy to act as everyone’s shield.

Physical attacks were completely ineffective against a Beast Vassal. Furthermore, Astarte’s Beast Vassal, Rhododactylos, reflected and absorbed magical energy. This meant, in other words, any kind of attack could not harm Astarte’s Beast Vassal.

Even so, Kojou’s expression twisted in fear.

“It’s no good, Astarte! Not against Cas’s... I mean Kasugaya’s sword, Hauras!”

Shizuri launched her attack before Astarte could react to Kojou’s yell. Holding

the crimson sword in a low stance, she sprinted, slicing toward the huge humanoid Beast Vassal.

Astarte manipulated the Beast Vassal's arm in an attempt to block the attack. No doubt she intended to capture Shizuri unharmed.

However, immediately before contact was made with Shizuri, a deep gash was sliced into the enormous arm.

To a Beast Vassal constructed of demonic energy, the damage itself was not threatening, but Astarte reacted late to the unexpected impact. While Astarte struggled to reorient herself, Shizuri leaped into the golem's flank, slashing it over and over.

"Miss Astarte's Beast Vassal is being sliced apart...!" Yukina exclaimed with a heavy heart. After all, even her Snowdrift Wolf had proven unable to damage Astarte's Beast Vassal.

Shizuri was breaking through Rhododactylos's impregnable defenses with ease. It was a one-sided fight. Indeed, her sword seemed to increase in might the more it sliced into Rhododactylos.

"Her sword gets stronger as it consumes demonic energy. You can't block that sword with a Beast Vassal! Pull back!" Kojou warned.

Astarte politely obeyed. She surely understood that prolonging the fight would only be to Shizuri's advantage. Using the overwhelming strength in her golem's legs, Astarte jumped backward in one bound. Shizuri made no attempt to pursue.

"Cas...!"

Kojou stood still and defenseless as he called out to Shizuri. Behind him, Yukina quietly raised her spear.

"I have finally found you, Kojou Akatsuki."

Shizuri's voice sounded robotic, as if speaking to someone unfamiliar to her. She looked back at Kojou with emotionless eyes, training her crimson blade toward him.

"Return to Onrai Island, Fourth Primogenitor. Absconding from a Demon

Sanctuary is a serious offense.”

“Absconding...?”

Shizuri’s false accusation threw Kojou for a loop.

Of course, Kojou had no memory of fleeing from Onrai Island. She had to have seen Kojou vanish from the *Carceri* the moment he’d been impaled by Yukina’s spear. It had happened right in front of her.

“Wait, Cas. You really came here from Onrai Island? How...?”

Yaze had said Onrai Island didn’t exist.

Yet, here was Shizuri, telling him to return to Onrai Island. Did that mean travel to and from Onrai Island was actually possible...?

Shizuri chose not to answer. She lowered her center of gravity, holding her sword up. Kojou recognized this stance. She did this before charging her enemy.

“I am a Paladin of Gisella, watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor. For the protection of Onrai Island, I shall guide Kojou Akatsuki to the *Carceri*—!”

“Cas, stop it! Kasugaya!”

Kojou’s expression stiffened as he yelled. He had no desire to fight her. He didn’t think he could win against her in the first place.

Disregarding Kojou’s plea, Shizuri kicked off the ground, hurling herself toward him.

Her acceleration was overwhelming. It was beyond human limits. She closed the distance between them in a blink. Her crimson blade traced a beautiful arc that would sever Kojou’s torso in two—

That instant, a silver blade resembled a beam as it raced into Kojou and Shizuya’s fields of vision.

“Snowdrift Wolf!”

“—?!”

Shizuri’s eyes wavered in shock. The sword she had swung with the speed of the gods had been blocked by the silver spear just before reaching Kojou. Shizuri used the power of the clashing sword’s recoil to leap backward, whereas

Yukina re-poised her spear, keeping up her guard.

“H-Himeragi...?!” It took Kojou, frozen stiff, a moment to grasp the situation.

By that time, Yukina and Shizuri had clashed once more. Each of them understood that the opponent before her was a powerful foe. Their guards were up.

“The demonic energy of Hauras... It’s vanished...?!”

Shizuri bit her lip a little when she saw that her beloved sword had lost its glow. Hauras, its might likely amplified from consuming Astarte’s Beast Vassal, had reverted to an ordinary long sword. Yukina’s demonic-energy-nullifying Snowdrift Wolf had erased the demonic energy the sword had accumulated.

“Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella, I am your opponent,” Yukina said solemnly, showing no sign of being swayed by Shizuri’s anger.

Kojou did not stop Yukina. More accurately, he could not stop her. He couldn’t even approach the pair as they glared at each other from a safe distance. All he would accomplish by carelessly approaching was getting in Yukina’s way.

Shizuri’s expression was full of hostility. “And who might you be?”

“Yukina Himeragi. A Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.”

“...The Lion King Agency?” Shizuri tilted her little head slightly. She probably didn’t know the name.

“Please put down your weapon and surrender. Your sword’s ability is ineffective against Snowdrift Wolf,” Yukina warned.

Shizuri took that as a provocation, though. The sharpness of her beautiful features increased.

“Do not underestimate me!”

As she spat out the words, Shizuri stepped into the gap separating her and Yukina.

Reflexively controlling her spear, Yukina parried Shizuri’s sword. However, Yukina did not refrain from counterattacks. She used the force of the recoil to

spin her spear around, turning its fully metallic shaft as a blunt weapon to assault the side of Shizuri's head. Shizuri ducked her upper body to evade the attack and unleashed a slice from a low stance. With elegant steps, Yukina eluded the crimson blade before thrusting with Snowdrift Wolf once more. Shizuri swung her sword down from on high to parry the blade head-on. The two weapons clashed, and the force pushed both of them backward. It was truly an even battle.

"Cas, stop it! You too, Himeragi!" Kojou shouted.

It was futile. His voice vanished amid the sound of blades clashing.

Even with his enhanced vision from his vampire abilities, Kojou couldn't track the pair's movements as they blended together. All he could see were countless after-images of weapons and flying sparks.

"What is your relationship to Kojou?!" Shizuri yelled, keeping up a flurry of continuous attacks.

"I am his watcher!" Yukina replied while beating down the virtual storm of slicing attacks.

That instant, a hint of distress like never before arose in Shizuri's eyes.

"Excuse me?! Watcher?! That is *my* duty! I am the one who has been eating and sleeping with him every day for the last half year!"

Bereft of emotion, Astarte repeated, "Eating and...sleeping together..."

"That's not true! Well, I guess that's not technically a lie, but it wasn't like that!" Kojou hastily denied. He needed to dispel any unfortunate misunderstandings.

With an especially ferocious metallic echo, Yukina and Shizuri put distance between each other once more. The air of fatigue was thick with both of them. Yukina's breathing was labored, and Shizuri's brow was drenched with sweat.

"Senpai, Miss Kasugaya is likely not in her right mind at present," Yukina said.



“Er, that’s probably right, but...”

He knew that. He’d understood Shizuri wasn’t in her right mind from the very fact she’d been controlling Larvae.

“Thus...,” said Yukina, narrowing her eyes. “I am sorry, but I shall have to subdue her by force!”

“That is my line! I shall show you the power of a Paladin of Gisella! Hauras!”

With a roar, Shizuri accelerated, holding her sword above her head, ready to bring it down to one side with all her strength. It was a type of offensive strike that also left her defenses open—Shizuri’s specialty.

Yukina got out of the way by a single hairsbreadth, only thanks to her Future Sight as a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. She had seen the arc of Shizuri’s sword a moment faster than it could be traced.

“Wha—?!”

Surprised by her sure-kill attack being eluded, the tempo of Shizuri’s movements slowed. The first opening she showed proved crucial.

“—Roaring Thunder!!”

Yukina’s knee slammed into Shizuri’s flank. It was a Sword Shaman close-combat technique developed with anti-demon combat in mind. The refined ritual energy within it became a shock wave that penetrated the armor of Shizuri’s coat.

“Grounded Lightning!”

With Shizuri’s movements halted, Yukina spun around and attacked Shizuri’s temple with a back-knuckle strike. With that *thud*, Shizuri’s head made an unnatural lurch. The blow had surely shaken her brain.

“A-are you crazy, Himeragi...?!” Kojou’s face went pale. “That’s totally overdoing it!”

It was Shizuri who’d come slicing first, but self-defense had its limits. A Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency could render beast people powerless with their bare hands. If a normal human squarely took one of Yukina’s attacks, their life

could be in danger.

Kojou's concerns went away fast, replaced by fear.

To keep herself upright, Shizuri had dug her feet in then and there, brandishing her sword once more.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Shizuri put her whole body into a sword strike against Yukina, who was defenseless directly after her attack.

"Urk...!"

Yukina managed to block the counterattack in the nick of time. The distinctive serrated blade of Hauras collided with the shaft of Snowdrift Wolf, scattering pale sparks all about. Even so, Shizuri did not relent in her attacks. She proceeded to shake the slammed sword free, sending Yukina's body flying backward.

"Himeragi...?!"

Kojou watched, unable to do a thing as Yukina slammed into the ground back-first.

Shizuri was an exceptional swordswoman, but by no means did she have an imposing physique. Normally, you would never think she could have sent Yukina flying with a single hand. On top of that, it was downright mystifying how she could stand after Yukina had attacked her earlier.

Shizuri's unfocused eyes found him. "Kojou...let's go home...together..."

Even though her mind was hazy, she reached a hand out toward Kojou. The wimple she wore fell off her head, and her sparkling white hair fluttered out.

"Kasugaya...you're...," Kojou rasped.

Shizuri was in no condition to be walking upright at the moment. Even so, she approached Kojou out of sheer obstinacy. It was a heart-wrenching sight.

The fallen Yukina forced herself to her feet bit by bit. "I understand now... Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella, you're..."

The damage to her was by no means small. She was unable to even pick up

her dropped spear.

Seeing Yukina like that, Shizuri's eyes suddenly regained their focus.

"Aaaaaah—!"

Shizuri, raising her crimson long sword high, sliced toward Yukina, giving her no time to regain her footing. Shizuri was most likely relying on her own combat instincts at this point. However, her attacks no longer had the speed or precision they did moments before.

Easily eluding the sword thrust toward her, Yukina entered Shizuri's flank. With rather slow motion, she pressed her palm to Shizuri's chest, slamming a shock wave into her body.

"—Distort!"

Shizuri trembled. She let out a short gasp as the strength left her body. Shizuri finally lost consciousness. Yukina gently laid her on the ground.

"Himeragi, are you all right?!" Kojou rushed over as Yukina remained squatted.

Yukina's uniform was heavily askew, and her bangs stuck to her sweat-drenched forehead. She was still trying to catch her breath. But the damage Shizuri had taken was far greater. Kojou was shocked she was even breathing.

"And Cas...? You didn't kill her, right?" he asked timidly, leaning over to see the girl.

Astarte grasped Shizuri's wrist and began measuring her heartbeats. Originally, she had been designed as a medical homunculus. In a situation like this, she was more reliable than any bottom-of-the-barrel doctor.

Staring at her opponent, Yukina answered haltingly, "I believe she is merely unconscious. However, she is—"

She cut herself off.

Kojou nodded in silence. He knew what she meant.

Natsuki's voice abruptly arose in the back of his mind once more. The Paladins of Gisella had no survivors.

“I see, Cas...you’re...”

Kojou gently touched the side of Shizuri’s sleeping face.

Bright white hair adorned her head, but there were unfamiliar things above her ears. They were tiny protrusions resembling hair ornaments, not even reaching ten centimeters in length. They had been hidden beneath her wimple the entire time.

A pair of gleaming, jade horns...

Proof that she was a Demon.

Intermission III

The roses were blooming.

The giant flowers buried the whole surface of the sky.

The spectacle was at once a densely concentrated aurora, yet also a vortex of demonic energy.

Hieroglyphics drawn in the air covered a diameter of tens of kilometers. They were scarlet roses wrought from magic.

The falling rose petals danced in the sky, transforming into malevolent, phantom beasts. They greatly resembled vampire Beast Vassals. They were collections of dense demonic energy possessing their own sentience: beasts summoned from another world.

“Shinako!”

A single girl called out from inside the storm born from rampaging demonic energy. Despite wearing plain, dirty clothing, she was beautiful; anyone’s eyes would rest upon her. The white hair spilling out from beneath her wimple danced in the wind. Tears would not stop welling up in her blue eyes.

In her arms, the girl carried a female knight with a gentle visage.

The knight was in her mid-twenties or thereabouts. Her charming face possessed gentleness and gallantry in equal measure. The painful wear and tear visible on her armor made her look like a grizzled warrior straight out of myth and legend.

Her armor was ruined, and the surface of the ground was drenched in fresh blood. The right hand that gripped her long sword was charred, and the awful stench of scorched flesh hovered in the air.

“Shinako, why?!” the white-haired girl shouted as she crouched down with the wounded knight.

The knight gently touched the side of that girl’s face with her hand. Her fingertips were cold, without blood flow. Her strong arms felt as frail as a single

feather.

“So you...made it out safe, Shizuri... Thank goodness...” Shinako’s voice was weak, ready to disappear.

The girl strongly embraced that gently smiling, battle-worn knight.

“Why?! Shinako, you should have been able to easily fend off an attack like that all by yourself. So why...?!”

“My duty is to protect everyone in this place. That is why I was granted this secret armament. That is why...”

The knight gazed at her long sword with a look of satisfaction. Its blade, undulating like a flame, dazzled as it glowed with vast demonic energy. She had lost count of how many Rose Beast Vassals it had felled as it had consumed their demonic energy.

Her valiant fighting had saved the white-haired girl. Thousands of citizens had been left behind in a city on the brink of destruction. However, there was no end to the Beast Vassals. The knight’s strength had been exhausted, and death had its clutches on her.

“But...Shinako, you...!” The girl despaired.

In spite of that, the knight hid her agony, offering a charming smile. “You are so gentle, Shizuri... Gisella was indeed right to have saved you.”

“...!”

The knight’s words, full of pride, made the girl audibly gasp. She bit her lip, placing her own hand upon the knight’s charred right arm.

Raggedly wiping off the tears drenching her cheeks, the white-haired girl quietly said, “I will protect them—”

“Shizuri?”

The knight’s eyes narrowed, bewildered. The girl took the sword from the knight’s right hand.

“I shall protect everyone in your place!”

Beneath that declaration was a voice shuddering in pain.

Infused with vast demonic energy, the long sword imposed a burden on its possessor just from wielding it in her hand. To the girl, no trained knight, the agony must have been akin to gripping molten iron.

Even so, she did not let go.

Surprised, the knight made a little nod. With a face full of resolve and determination, she smiled brightly.

“Understood. Shizuri Castiella, in the name of Shinako Kasugaya, I grant thee the sword Hauras.”

The knight gently put her left hand over the girl’s on the sword. At the same time as the knight chanted that holy vow, the girl’s pain faded. The sword had acknowledged her as its new master.

“Shinako—?!”

All strength drained from the knight’s body, as if that was the ceremony’s price.

The girl carrying the sword let out an anguished cry as she watched the knight slowly collapse.

“Good night, Shizuri...my very own paladin...,” said the smiling knight, lying in a sea of fresh blood.

The girl’s narrow shoulders trembled as she watched the knight gently close her eyes. She turned to the sky, seemingly fighting back a flood of tears.

The roses covering the sky scattered, whereupon they summoned new phantom beasts.

The countless Beast Vassals were consumed as four new beasts came into being.

The girl did not know that these were known as the Four Holy Beasts. However, even from the ground at a great distance removed, it was immediately apparent that the beasts possessed overwhelming demonic energy.

If the beasts completely materialized, they would surely destroy the island in the blink of an eye.

I shall not allow it.

She had made a promise. She would protect that island and everyone on it.

Come what may...

A dark gray silhouette of a character with short, spiky hair and small horns. The character is shown from the back, holding a sword that extends downwards. The background is a light gray gradient.

CHAPTER FOUR THE LOST DEMON SANCTUARY

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THE LOST DEMON SANCTUARY

1

“...An Ogre?”

Watching as Shizuri slept in a clinic room bed, Kojou deeply furrowed his brow.

Yaze and Astarte were hastily running all over to clean up the mess of the situation. That left only Kojou and Yukina in the clinic room. Fortunately, as it was Sunday, they at least had no concern that other students would visit the clinic.

He had seen the horns protruding from Shizuri's head, and they were the only thing that made her seem like a Demon. From the bizarre resilience she'd demonstrated in her fight with Yukina, she was clearly no ordinary person. Even so, Shizuri's personality and the image associated with that of a horned Demon did not neatly line up inside Kojou's mind.

“Yes. That is what Miss Kasugaya is. It is a rare variety of Demon in danger of extinction,” Yukina explained.

If that's what she believed after seriously going up against her, Kojou could only trust her judgment.

“Pretty different from what I expected for an Ogre...”

Kojou pursed his lips as he made a quiet murmur. Shizuri's coat and wimple were neatly folded atop a nearby sofa. Just in case, Yukina was still holding the long sword Hauras against her chest. Seeing Shizuri lying there in her school uniform, she looked every bit like a transfer student with a slightly eccentric hair ornament.

“They are mistaken for savage and barbarous demons, but Ogres are actually a quite gentle and delicate species,” Yukina continued seriously, realizing Kojou was even more suspicious. “Prior to the enactment of the Holy Ground Treaty, large-scale conflicts had arisen between Ogres and humans more than once. Though in the first place, they avoid contact with humankind and other demons, preferring to live deep in the jungle.”

“I see... Kind of like gorillas in the wild...” Kojou nodded in understanding.

He had heard that people feared gorillas because of how imposing they looked, but in reality, they were intelligent and generally docile animals. He had no doubt that the fear human beings harbored for Ogres was the product of similar misunderstandings.

And just as Kojou had those thoughts, accepting them as fact all on his own...

“...Who are you calling a gorilla?” Shizuri grumbled as she opened her eyes a little. She was probably grimacing not in annoyance from having heard Kojou and Yukina’s conversation, but from the pain of being pummeled.

“Cas, are you all right? Do you remember what happened?” Kojou asked while remaining on guard to restrain Shizuri at any moment.

Shizuri stared at the wary Kojou. She looked confused. The reaction displayed no enmity toward Kojou or Yukina. Shizuri was behaving normally.

“Ow...!”

When Shizuri gently tried to sit up, she put a hand to the back of her own head. It was Yukina who had hit her with a back-knuckle strike. The attack had nearly sent her spectacularly flying away; apparently it really did have quite an effect.

“Don’t push it. You had the stuffing beaten out of you.”

“I am sorry, but Miss Kasugaya is very strong, so...”

When Kojou spoke out of consideration for Shizuri, Yukina’s shoulders sank guiltily. She’d no doubt reflected upon it, less about the damage she’d inflicted on Shizuri, and more that she did not have the luxury of holding back at the time.

For her part, Shizuri took Yukina's words as a compliment. She pushed down the dregs of waking up sourly as a not-so-displeased expression came over her.

"I remember, more or less. You are a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, correct?" Shizuri spoke with an unfamiliarity with the terms. She pressed a hand to her forehead, rummaging through hazy memories. Then, she looked to and fro at the clinic interior with a look of concern. She knitted her brows as her eyes came to rest on the unfamiliar scenery outside the window.

"Where am I?"

"So you really don't remember? You came attacking our school dragging a horde of Larvae with you, you know? Ah... By school, I mean, Itogami Island's Saikai Academy."

"Itogami Island...?"

As Shizuri listened to Kojou's explanation, it was obvious this was not ringing a bell. The very fact that she was outside of Onrai Island seemed to have perplexed her to no small extent.

To confirm the scenery outside, Shizuri shifted her gaze to the window once more. Her white hair danced with a pronounced *swish*. For an instant, Shizuri looked taken aback, no doubt because she realized she was not wearing her wimple. Instantly, she seemed to try and hide her horns, but then she lowered her hands, abandoning the effort. She understood that Kojou and Yukina already knew her true nature.

"You...saw them, didn't you?"

Shizuri looked back at Kojou's face, suppressing a sigh. She maintained an emotionless face, but Kojou realized that her eyes were swaying with fear.

"—Laugh all you like." Shizuri spoke in a self-mocking tone.

"Laugh?" Kojou had no idea what she was implying. "At what?"

Shizuri glared at him, pouting with tapered lips.

"That an Ogre of all people presented herself as a Paladin of Gisella."

Kojou blinked at the unexpected confession. "By that do you mean you weren't a real paladin?"

To Kojou, the confession was far more surprising than the fact she was a demon. After all, whatever the circumstances, Shizuri had always asserted she was a paladin and had always acted the part.

However, Shizuri strongly clenched her bedsheet, laughing with an expression that could break into tears at any moment.

“Even Hauras truly belongs to Shinako.....the paladin who saved my life. She merely passed it on to me. In truth, I am not qualified to bear that title whatsoever... A most pathetic tale for one who claims to observe the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“I don’t think it’s pathetic at all.” Kojou scratched his face as if her words were bothersome.

“Eh?” Surprised, Shizuri blinked.

“I don’t know about this ‘real’ paladin business, but I saw from up close that you were trying hard to act the part. I never thought that was a bad look from you, not once, okay? I do think you should speak more casually, but—”

“Kojou...”

An expression without any definable form came over Shizuri’s face. She looked like she couldn’t decide whether to thank him or rage at him. For his part, Kojou acted like it was somehow grandiose praise.

“For that matter, I’m like, the Paladins of Gisella really do exist. I was wondering if you had made it up in your own head.”

“Of course they *existed!*”

This time, Shizuri trembled with obvious ire. *Just what do you think I am*, her twitching left eyelid said.

Perhaps judging that leaving things up to Kojou wouldn’t get them anywhere, Yukina reluctantly intervened. “—Miss Kasugaya, you were one of the demons under Gisella’s protective custody, were you not?”

“Protective custody? Inside a Demon Sanctuary?” Kojou tilted his head. “Why?”

A Demon Sanctuary was a model city built with the aim of coexistence

between Demonkind and humankind. With Demon rights protected under the Holy Ground Treaty, it was virtually unheard of for harm to be inflicted upon them.

However, Yukina lowered her eyes and shook her head with what seemed like a pained look. “Ogres are hunted down... Many are targeted for kidnapping. The atrocities are not few, even in Dominions and Demon Sanctuaries—”

“Hunted...? Oh—the horns!”

Kojou shifted his eyes toward Shizuri’s horns. Yukina nodded with a hard expression.

“I have heard that Ogre’s horns and skulls are bought and sold at high prices. Of course, this is illicit black-market trading, but...”

“That’s terrible... I mean, they’re definitely pretty. I get why they fetch high prices, but man...”

Kojou’s face twisted in disgust. The sale of demonic horns and fangs was strictly forbidden by treaty. Even so, smuggling had never ceased thereafter, and apparently more than a few demons were slain in hunts even to the present day.

With Kojou looking straight at her in complete seriousness, Shizuri seemed unable to relax; her gaze wandered all about.

“P-pretty...?”

“Yeah.”

Kojou looked back at Shizuri, mystified that her cheeks were bright red for some reason. Shizuri’s gleaming, jade-colored horns were beautiful enough to make high-priced gemstones and handicrafts look like cheap baubles.

“Could I touch them, just for a sec?”

It’d be a waste not to, Kojou seemed to be saying. Yukina pursed her lips, and Shizuri’s eyes popped wide.

“T-touch? You mean m-my...?”

“It’s been on my mind a bit since earlier. I was thinking, wouldn’t it feel really

nice to touch one?”

Kojou nodded without hesitation. The brilliant luster of Shizuri’s horns held a charm instilling an *I wanna touch them* craving that seemed irresistible. Just like when looking at polished glass or flakes of snow, you felt a deep stirring to touch.

Perhaps Kojou’s gaze instilled some kind of instinctive fear, for Shizuri covered her horns and shook her head.

“N-no! Absolutely not! To allow a boy to touch them is unthinkable!”

“Aw, really...? It’s not like I’m going to be rough or anything.”

Kojou’s dejection was plain for all to see. Being told he couldn’t touch them made him want to all the more—such was his thought process.

Shizuri’s fingers began fidgeting and entwining on both sides as she seemed to hesitate.

“I mean...it...it’s embarrassing... And no one has ever touched them before...”

“Please. Pretty please. Just the tips. Just the tips and only for a bit, please!”

“Umm...”

Shizuri leaned forward and fell silent. From her reaction, she seemed to be wavering. *One more push and she’ll fold*, said Kojou’s competitive instincts.

As if able to see Kojou’s unyielding thoughts, Yukina opened her mouth without thinking.

“Um, Senpai—”

“What do you think you’re doing, Kojou?!”

The next moment, the clinic room’s door opened with what seemed enough force to break it off its hinges.

Standing on the other side of the door was a schoolgirl with an extravagant hairstyle. Her eyes, framed by long eyelashes, glared with a vivid glow of rage.

“A-Asagi?”

“I heard everything from here in the corridor! What are you trying to do to an

injured girl in broad daylight?! And Himeragi, if you're standing right next to him, stop him already! Or don't tell me you were planning a threesome?!"

A wild patter of footsteps echoed as Asagi Aiba stormed her way toward Kojou.

Kojou, his expression frozen in abject shock, proceeded to shake his head. "No way, you moron! What the hell were you picturing?!"

"D-don't make me say the 'what' out loud, you pervert!"

"What 'what'?!"

"Wait, this is the girl who tried to kill me! What are you getting along all nice with her for?!"

Asagi was still gripping Kojou by his collar when she pointed accusingly at Shizuri.

The look on Kojou's face suddenly grew graver. "Tried to kill you?"

"That's right. Zombies attacked, and even my tank got wrecked. I'd have been in real trouble if she hadn't saved me...!"

"...Who?"

That instant, seemingly unable to hold back any longer, he heard someone break out into laughter from beyond the open door. Finally, the laughter changed into a cheerful, sunny voice.

"Just like usual, there's flowers blooming all around you, Kojou."

These words spoken, a girl with a lively air about her entered the room, a teasing smile coming over her face. Her hairstyle was a short bob with divided forelocks. She wore a culotte-style miniskirt with a uniform from a public high school in Itogami City. The rugged basketball shoes she wore meshed cutely with her long, slender legs.



“Yuuma...!”

The unexpected reunion with his old friend took Kojou completely by surprise.

“Been a while. Seems you’re up and lively.”

Yuuma Tokoyogi thrust a slightly out-of-place peace sign toward him.

2

Kojou’s shock did not last very long. That was because while he stood rooted to the spot, Shizuri was timidly tugging on his uniform.

“Who are they?” Shizuri asked. Kojou detected a hint of concern in her voice. She probably vaguely remembered having assaulted the pair of girls. Perhaps not remembering the reason why she had attacked them made her feel all the more fearful.

“Yuuma Tokoyogi. Nice to meet you. I suppose you could call me Kojou’s friend from when we were kids.”

As if to allay Shizuri’s concern, Yuuma flashed her a friendly smile as she spoke.

“Sh-Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella.”

Shizuri seemed captivated by Yuuma as she awkwardly spoke her own name in turn. Rather than break the ice, it seemed she had simply gotten caught up in Yuuma’s pace, but the tension had lessened all the same.

“Yuuma, what are you doing here? Is the Attack Mages’ investigation over already?” Kojou asked as Yuuma and Shizuri exchanged handshakes.

In autumn of the previous year, Attack Mages had arrested Yuuma following the Black Bible Incident on the basis of unauthorized use of a forbidden grimoire and aiding in the prison escape of her mother, Aya Tokoyogi, the Witch of the Notaria.

In her defense, Yuuma was a minor, and also a victim under her mother’s control. Thanks to this, the odds of Yuuma herself being put on trial had been

slim. She was arrested not because she was a sorcerous criminal herself but to protect her as a crucial witness. Yuuma, daughter of Aya Tokoyogi, was a very effective lead into the sorcerous criminal organization LCO that Aya had led as its general.

“It’s not over, Kojou. Sorry to worry you. I’ll give you the details nice and slow later,” Yuuma teased. She looked toward Shizuri once more. “More importantly, can I speak with her? I’m not exactly unrelated to the circumstances.”

“To Cas?”

Yuuma’s unexpected proposal left Kojou at a loss. Shizuri blinked, too, the expression coming over her face telling him that she didn’t get it, either. Shizuri’s eyes suddenly opened far wider.

That was no doubt due to the enormous, bluntly armored machine that had quietly appeared outside the clinic’s window.

“Wh-what is it now...?!” she asked Kojou in a flustered yet angry tone.

It was a crimson robot tank about the size of a light truck—Lydianne Didier’s Hizamaru. Its sleek, rounded form made it seem less imposing, but it was a weapon system nonetheless. Kojou couldn’t blame Shizuri for putting up her guard.

“I heard the gist of it from Motoki, see...,” Asagi said.

Shizuri was frozen stiff; Asagi was oozing with suspicion and enmity toward Shizuri. Kojou wasn’t sure he should blame that on Shizuri having targeted her life, or the relative closeness between Shizuri and Kojou having roused Asagi’s ire.

“There is a lot I would like to ask you, but before that, would you mind if I inspect you first, Miss Kasugaya?”

Shizuri glared. “Boil me or fry me, do with me as you please.”

“Good answer.” Asagi smiled, but it felt hostile—blatantly villainous, even.

Kojou, warily looking between the pair’s faces, wedged himself between their aggressive glares.

“Hey, Asagi. She’s a patient, you know. Don’t be too rough with Cas, oka—”

“Do it, Tanker,” Asagi called out to Lydianne, blatantly ignoring Kojou’s concerns.

“As thou wishest,” came Lydianne’s reply over the speaker.

The robotic tank’s torso opened, and writhing, tentacle-like manipulators shot out. These deftly passed through the open clinic window, firmly immobilizing Shizuri’s left arm.

“!!”

Shizuri went pale as the final manipulator stretched out toward her arm. Embedded in its tip was a dully gleaming needle.

“...An injector? No, for taking blood?” Kojou murmured in a daze, realizing Lydianne’s objective. When he observed further, he realized Shizuri hadn’t resisted since the beginning. With intricate, practiced motions like that of a well-trained nurse, the syringe needle punctured one of Shizuri’s blood vessels, slowly collecting her plasma.

“Sample collection complete. Sir Mogwai, I request that thou complete the rest.”

“No prob.”

A very human-sounding synthetic voice coursed out from Asagi’s smartphone. The blood plasma collected from Shizuri was swiftly inserted into the analytical system built into the robot tank. It included a centrifugal separator, a particle analysis system, a fluorescence spectrometer, and demonic energy and ritual formula analyzers—all heavy-duty analytical devices.

“Wasn’t this a blood test? What are they up to?”

“Please do not ask me.”

Kojou’s question made Shizuri shake her head with a sullen expression. Yukina maintained her silence as she applied an adhesive bandage to Shizuri’s arm.

“How about it, Asagi?” Yuuma asked, back to business.

Asagi stared at the analysis system’s monitor as she nodded. “It’s as we thought. Same as what was left in the game-center cabinet.”

“Can you analyze it?”

“The magical constructs in the sample I took from her haven’t degraded, and I’m already set up for reverse engineering. Leave it to me.”

Asagi smiled impishly as she input commands beyond Kojou’s comprehension.

He realized that a faint red light was trickling out from the analysis system she was operating. These had vermilion particles with minute magical symbols on the inside—the radiance of the forbidden, world-rewriting spell, the Cleansing.

“Hey, Asagi. Explain so that the rest of us can understand!” he demanded, uneasy.

“It’ll take a little while for the magical calculation circuits to do their thing, so sure. What do you want to know?” Asagi mixed a sigh in with a slouch of her shoulders.

Though he felt a fair bit of irritation at her standoffish attitude, complaining about that wouldn’t get him anywhere, so Kojou endured it with a clench of his fist.

After some momentary hesitation, Kojou finally began with the most fundamental question at hand.

“Do you know what Onrai Island really is?”

“...Onrai Island? You mean the Demon Sanctuary you supposedly lived on? Seems you forgot all about us and got along rather nicely with this girl over here...”

“It wasn’t exactly ‘nicely’ —”

“W-we did no such thing!”

Kojou and Shizuri’s retorts were weirdly in sync. Asagi stared back at them with half-lidded eyes.

“What you heard from Motoki and the others is the truth. Onrai Island does not exist,” Asagi declared with a weary shake of her head.

Unsatisfied with that, Kojou pointed at Shizuri right beside him. “Then where the hell did Kasugaya come from?”

“From Onrai Island. Or am I wrong?”

“Huh...?”

Asagi’s reply threw Kojou completely for a loop.

Onrai Island did not exist; yet Shizuri had come from Onrai Island. He didn’t understand how those statements could both be true. Was this some kind of trick question?

“In reality, no island named Onrai exists. However, in a place that is not reality, such a place could very well exist...inside someone’s dream, for example,” Asagi explained to the utterly confused Kojou.

“Inside...a dream...?” Kojou’s eyes opened wide. He felt like fireworks were going off in the back of his head. “You can’t mean...!”

“Exactly,” Yuuma chimed in softly as she leaned against the wall facing outside. “Onrai Island is most likely a Prison Barrier...or perhaps more precisely, an alternate dimension created according to similar principles as the Prison Barrier you’re familiar with.”

The Prison Barrier was the name of the magical virtual space created by Natsuki Minamiya, also known as the Witch of the Void. This world, constructed within her own dream, was the ultimate prison, permitting neither intrusion from the outside, nor escape from within. It was used to incarcerate the most heinous sorcerous criminals. It existed in concert with Itogami Island, yet it was a separate world located outside of it. Certainly, this nature greatly resembled that of Onrai Island.

“A Prison Barrier is another world constructed within someone’s dream. Because it’s in a dream, time there flows at a different speed. In the span of only three days, you could experience half a year, even multiple times over. It could even inhibit the summoning of the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor—am I wrong?”

“No...that makes sense. That’s right, it was definitely like...”

Yuuma’s words made the countless questions Kojou harbored fall away like melting ice. Onrai Island truly was another realm like the Prison Barrier—he had no objection to that theory, but...

“But isn’t that crazy?! The scale is way too huge compared with Natsuki’s Prison Barrier. The resident population of Onrai Island is six thousand people! Just the land surface alone might be bigger than Itogami Island—”

“You have a point. Maintaining a Prison Barrier requires vast magical energy and an off-the-charts volume of magical calculations. These are things Ms. Minamiya gained through her pact as a witch, but even so, the scale of the barrier she can deploy is about one castle’s worth at most. Even with that, she cannot create a world so real that it could be mistaken for reality when seen up close.”

Yuuma easily affirmed Kojou’s objection.

“But that’s why she doesn’t need *this*,” Asagi said, thrusting a tablet connected to the analysis system in front of Kojou. Round, silver particles resembling viruses under a microscope were displayed on the tablet’s screen.

“...What is this?” he asked.

Kojou tried to wrap his head around it. All Yukina could do was blink her eyes open and shut.

“These particles...are tiny magical machines collected from Miss Kasugaya’s blood. Perhaps we should call them something like nano-*shikigami*. The size is on par with a virus, and they have self-propagation systems and magical calculation circuits built in. At the moment they’re largely inert due to being showered with powerful ritual energy from an external source, though.”

Asagi pointed at Shizuri as she spoke. *Powerful ritual energy from an external source* no doubt meant the blunt strikes Yukina had delivered to Shizuri. Apparently, the Sword Shaman attacks meant to impede a demon’s biological abilities had an effect on nano-*shikigami* as well.

“Nano-*shikigami*...? These are inside my body?” As she stared at the virus look-alikes displayed on the tablet, Shizuri’s shoulders trembled with fear.

“They might inhabit Onrai Island’s entire population,” Asagi said. “Robbing Kojou of his memory and hindering the summoning of his Beast Vassals was probably their doing...”

She input weird-looking commands once more. Apparently, she had some

kind of plan for the nano-*shikigami* she had collected from Shizuri.

“The barrier world called Onrai Island is maintained through use of these *shikigami*—meaning, put conversely, people without nano-*shikigami* cannot perceive Onrai Island, nor can they enter that world. With some real elbow grease, I managed to send Himeragi into the barrier while I made magical calculations from the outside, though.”

“Oh... So that’s what the Himeragi ghost we saw was...”

Kojou thought back to Yukina’s spectral appearance back on Onrai Island. Unable to fully materialize because she did not have nano-*shikigami*, she was nothing but an interloper so far as Onrai Island was concerned.

“Wait. Then, the reason Himeragi impaled me with her spear back then was to—”

“Yes. It was to destroy the nano-*shikigami* inside your body. That time with Ms. Minamiya had already established that Snowdrift Wolf’s abilities function even within a Prison Barrier, and the reason I aimed near the heart was for maximum efficiency in sending the Divine Oscillation Effect into blood vessels throughout the body.” Yukina bowed deeply. “I am very sorry.”

Her using the spear on Kojou had doubtlessly been a dangerous gamble; Snowdrift Wolf was a purging spear capable of destroying even a vampire primogenitor. Even in an incomplete, not-fully-materialized state, its might was sufficient to annihilate a Debris with ease. Kojou felt a cold chill run up his spine, belatedly comprehending that his very life had been in danger.

However, Yukina’s attack had nonetheless brought Kojou back to Itogami Island.

“Be that as it may,” Lydianne said from her cockpit, *“magical calculation circuits on the inside of nano-shikigami is quite surprising. ’Tis impressive you noticed such a contrivance, Lady Empress.”*

Shizuri didn’t seem to fully understand. “Meaning, the technology truly is quite something?”

As the sort of Attack Mage who gave her all to physical improvement, she was at a fundamental disadvantage when it came to machines.

Asagi conceded the point with a “Well, yeah,” which Kojou found a bit surprising. “All the different magics used in it meant it took even me three days to analyze it. Cutting-edge doesn’t begin to describe it. To be honest, if not for the Cleansing, I might not have managed at all.”

“Wow...”

Though Kojou couldn’t really wrap his mind around what was being said, he put on a sober face and followed along as best he could.

Asagi, a girl who hummed tunes while deciphering even that Cleansing thing, had come out and confessed how difficult of a time she’d had. The creator who’d made these nano-*shikigami* no doubt possessed a frighteningly high level of technology.

“Who the hell used that high-end tech to create Onrai Island? And why?”

“Fastest way is to ask the one who made it, I suppose,” Yuuma replied.

At some point, the usual amiable smile on her face had vanished. She was glaring at the entrance to the clinic room with bloodlust as sharp as any blade.

“The one who made it?” Perplexed, Kojou looked at Yuuma. He suddenly sensed space twisting from the corner of his vision.

A complex magical circle reminiscent of a powerful gate spawned in the corridor of Saikai Academy. It gave off ominous purple crackles of lightning as space was slowly rent. Spatial manipulation had been used to create a “gate” to another realm—the entrance to the barrier world had opened.

Emerging from within was a woman wearing a provocative outfit: a white gown over a swimsuit. Kojou and Shizuri simultaneously drew in a breath, for her face was one they knew very well.

“That would be Kako Magatoki, aka the Witch of the Dusk—former Great Librarian of LCO Unit Number 5, Science.”

Kako Magatoki made a sultry smile as she listened to Yuuma’s voice.

“Instructor Magatoki is a...former LCO officer...?” Shizuri murmured, her voice trembling.

Raised in the Demon Sanctuary of Iroise, the name of the criminal organization LCO was surely a familiar one to her. Shizuri’s voice was a mixture of shock and fear.

It was then that Yukina returned her longsword. She’d judged that Shizuri, too, required a weapon for self-defense. For her part, Yukina pulled her favorite guitar case close and retrieved her silver spear.

Meanwhile, Asagi retreated as far as the windowsill where the robot tank was. Yuuma stepped in front to cover her.

Kako met Yuuma’s hostile glare with an amused toss of her curly, blond hair. “I believe this is the first time we’ve met face-to-face. I have heard much about you, Yuuma Tokoyogi, Witch of the Blue...”

To a former LCO officer such as Kako, Yuuma was the daughter of a traitor. Nonetheless, her eyes displayed no enmity toward Yuuma. Instead, what lay behind them was a glimmer of pure inquisitiveness.

“It would seem you are hunting LCO remnants as a member of the Attack Mages. I am impressed you managed to make your contracted devil approve such a change in the terms of your pact.”

“If the LCO is wiped out, Aya Tokoyogi will be set free. That’s the promise the Attack Mages made me,” Yuuma replied with a courteous smile.

A witch was a person who’d obtained the power and blessing of a devil with a pact. Naturally, the pact included compensation that had to be paid. Those who defied their pacts would have their lives immediately taken by the devil’s familiar. Small wonder that it seemed like Yuuma, an LCO-created witch who had turned against them, must have breached her pact. That’s what Kako was asserting.

However, Yuuma calmly shook her head. “See, the duty imposed by my devil is to bring my mother out of the Prison Barrier. The means may have changed, but the goal hasn’t. Now that my mother has lost her powers, it’s no skin off the Attack Mages’ noses to free her.”

“Ah, I suppose so. That would mean you are obligated by your pact with your devil to apprehend me, does it not?”

“Yes. I’d love for you to come along quietly.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot live up to your expectations. I still have unfinished business.” Kako calmly smiled.

Kojou thought the pair’s conversation was like two invisible blades clashing. Everyone held their breath.

Shizuri interrupted, “Instructor Magatoki...is it true you’re an LCO officer?”

Oh my, expressed Kako, raising an eyebrow. She seemed slightly surprised that Shizuri had been freed of the nano-*shikigami* brainwashing.

“Why is the LCO popping back up at a time like this? Revenge?” Kojou made no attempt to conceal his irritation.

Aya Tokoyogi, who had created the direct cause of LCO’s decline, had already been incarcerated in the Prison Barrier. In the end, it had been Kojou and company who had apprehended her, but it didn’t make sense that this would attract the ire of the LCO’s remnants.

Kako glanced back at Kojou in amusement as she shook her head. “But of course not. At its core, the LCO is a group of grimoire researchers working for their own self-interests. Their loyalty to the organization is slim at best. I would never make an enemy of the Fourth Primogenitor for something as trifling as revenge.”

Kojou glared. “Then why did you take me to Onrai Island?”

According to Yukina and the others, Kojou hadn’t wound up at Onrai Island by accident. He had clearly been targeted for abduction. If that wasn’t for the sake of revenge, there had to be some other motive.

Kako’s reply was nothing like what Kojou expected, though.

“Why, it’s simply a little job on the side. A certain individual hired me to do that.” Kako displayed not a single shred of guilt as she spoke.

Kojou stared at her, completely astonished. “You were hired...? By who?”

“I can’t say that. My sponsor would prefer I kept this quiet, you see,” Kako said with a shake of her head.

Kojou’s voice became shrill with anger. “You can’t just use other people for profit without them having any say!”

“Mm, truly, a most sensible opinion. Well then, how much do I need to pay you for your cooperation, I wonder?”

“Even gall has its limits! What makes you think I’d cooperate with you now?!”

“Well, because lives are at stake, you see.”

Kako spoke in a tone of voice so composed it made Kojou shudder.

“What...?”

For a moment, Kojou was taken aback by Kako’s calm demeanor despite her words.

“My, my, my,” said Kako, smiling sarcastically. “You haven’t forgotten, have you? On Onrai Island, even at this very moment, there are six thousand residents remaining. Do you intend to stand by and watch them all perish?”

While Kojou gaped, Shizuri asked in his place: “What...do you mean?” Her voice, too, trembled with anger by that point.

“Onrai Island is an alternate realm constructed inside a magical barrier. A vast quantity of demonic energy is required to maintain that island. That demonic energy is drying up.” Kako sounded almost like an instructor. “At this rate, Onrai Island will cease to exist. It, and its six thousand residents, will be swallowed up by the other-space. That said, a replacement source of demonic energy is not so easily found. Sustaining that island requires vast demonic energy on par with a vampire primogenitor, you see.”

“You cannot mean...you intend to use Kojou as that source of demonic energy...?!” Shizuri’s cheeks stiffened.

Created by way of a curse from the very gods, vampire primogenitors possessed an inexhaustible negative life force. In other words, that meant their demonic energy was truly infinite. It would no doubt be possible to sustain Onrai Island with a primogenitor’s power.

Yuuma posed several questions, searching for gaps in Kako's armor. "Oh, I see. That's why you sent Miss Kasugaya here to drag Kojou back to Onrai Island? And she attacked Asagi first because she was analyzing the nano-*shikigami*, is that it?"

Yuuma's objective was to put Kako in irons. She had no reason to shoot the breeze with Kako like some sort of sucker. The reason Yuuma could not easily come out and attack Kako was because, despite her slovenly appearance, she did not reveal even a single opening.

"I suppose. But it is not as if I intend to use him as some sort of demonic sacrifice." Kako thinly smiled and shook her head. "For example, we could do this, Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella. You and Kojou Akatsuki could make love to each other, and you could give birth to new life. How about that?"

"Excuse me?" Shizuri exclaimed, going rigid. Apparently, even Shizuri, unversed in romance as she was, understood just what Kako was suggesting.

Kako nodded at her proposal as if singing her own praises. "A second-generation vampire should surely possess demonic energy nearly as vast as a primogenitor. I'm sure if you gave birth to ten or so, they could maintain the barrier with a minimal burden on them. If we alter the speed of the time flowing inside the barrier, we could compress the time leading to childbirth, too."

"Stop messing—!"

"—around with us!"

Kojou and Shizuri shouted simultaneously. When Kojou belatedly glanced over, both Yukina and Asagi were livid.

"Oh my? I thought it was a rather splendid idea..." Kako seemed almost flustered by their reactions. "But, Miss Kasugaya, if giving birth to them all would be too great a burden for you, we could have these girls be the Fourth Primogenitor's lovers as w—"

"That ain't the problem here!" said Kojou, finally exploding. "Why keep the residents of Onrai Island locked up?! Just get them out of the barrier, dammit!"

"That idea is out of the question. After all, the creator of Onrai Island seeks no

such thing.”

“The creator...?” Shizuri replied, recoiling at the word. If what Kako said was true, it was not Kako who had created Onrai Island. That meant someone else was maintaining the barrier.

“So if I beat the tar out of this creator, I can save the people of Onrai Island?” The corners of Kojou’s lips turned upward.

After all that time, it finally felt like he knew what he had to do. He’d defeat the administrator of the barrier, freeing the six thousand hostages held prisoner on Onrai Island. *Simple solutions are the best*, he thought, a smile creeping onto his face.

However, Kako also smiled as she spoke. “I suppose so. If you can, that is.”

Little monsters began pouring out from the shadow she cast at her feet: rotting corpses that possessed dead spirits.

“Larvae...!”

Shizuri drew her long sword from its scabbard. Yukina held her silver spear at the ready. Yuuma called forth her Guardian, a blue, faceless knight with a rusted sword. It was the familiar of her contracted devil.

The girls’ attacks made quick work of the dead spirits, but more remained. They pressed against Kojou and the others in overwhelming numbers, intending to drag them into the barrier world.

“I must say, I do not enjoy resorting to such brutish measures as this. Well, my efforts at persuasion failed, so it cannot be helped...,” Kako said with a buoyant tone of voice as she began tracing a magic circle. It was a magic symbol for spawning a teleportation gate.

“Snowdrift Wolf!”

It was Yukina who reacted ahead of everyone else. Holding her spear so that it grazed the floor, she sprinted toward Kako. She no doubt intended to dispatch the Larvae blocking her path and strike Kako down.

“It is somewhat dangerous to have you and the spear here. I would have you be silent for a time, Yukina Himeragi.”

Yukina swept her spear toward Kako's abdomen from the side. The tip of her spear was twisted so as to strike with the flat.

As Kojou thought the attack would hit its mark, Kako's form became vague—illusory—like the phantoms said to emerge at the hour of twilight...

“!”

The silver spear slipped straight through Kako, causing Yukina to slightly lose her balance. Kako lightly pressed a palm into Yukina's back. Her entire body trembled. Yukina lost consciousness, without even time to yelp, and collapsed to the floor.

“Himeragi?!”

Kojou was aghast that even Yukina had not been able to hold a candle to Kako.

Even if it was inside the barrier world, Kako Magatoki had served as an instructor at the College. It was hardly strange that she possessed actual might suitable for the position. Regardless, he'd never imagined that the gap would be that overwhelming. As far as Kojou knew, Yukina had never been taken out of commission this easily.

“Wha...? It can't be...?!”

“Ugh...!”

Yukina's defeat had shaken Shizuri and even Yuuma. Because they both had experience fighting Yukina, they were forced to acknowledge Magatoki's overwhelming might.

While they were occupied with Larvae, the magic circle was completed.

It exceeded ten meters in diameter. A far more enormous gate than Kako had emerged from was opening. Not only Kojou and Shizuri but Asagi and Lydianne at a distance were completely within its effective range. Because Yukina was unconscious, there was no one who could nullify that gate. That was why Kako had targeted Yukina first.

“This is bad...! Tanker! Go ahead—!”

Asagi shouted toward Lydianne. “*As thou wishest!*” came the reply with a

Medieval delivery as Lydianne fired something from the tank. This was a smoke round. White smoke was scattered all about, obscuring the vision of Kojou and company. However, the smoke screen was futile; they were already caught in the gate.

Picking up the unconscious Yukina, Kako leisurely turned toward Kojou, who was unable to move. He could not even get close to Kako's side. All he could do was gaze powerlessly as Yukina was taken from him.

"I'm so glad. It was worth coming all this way." Gazing at Kojou pathetically crawling across the floor, Kako narrowed her eyes in amusement.

"What...?!"

Kojou's vision contorted.

He was assailed by the unpleasant dizziness unique to being shifted to another dimension. He felt like he was floating as the ground crumbled beneath his feet. An expression of despair came over Kojou as the sight of Kako and Yukina receded.

Then, before he lost consciousness, Kojou heard the words of the Witch of the Dusk.

"That's the expression I wanted to see on your face, Kojou Akatsuki."

Intermission IV

She could hear an organ.

The reverberations held symmetry and gravitas. It was a stirring melody reminiscent of a hymn. There was no subtlety to it, but it was a beautiful performance nonetheless.

The performer was a teenage boy wearing a tailcoat. He was fourteen or fifteen, thereabouts. He was a beautiful young man with a delicate physique.

His eyes, framed by long eyelashes, were firmly closed as if in prayer. His shoulder-length hair was blond, altering in color depending on the angle like some kind of rainbow.

The fingers that continued dancing upon the keyboard seemed like beautiful, independent living creatures in their own right.

In that vast chamber that greatly resembled a church, the trailing, harmonious notes lingered and vanished.

“I have returned.”

Kako courteously bent the knee. She was wearing no white gown, but rather, a black dress, as if in mourning.

“You have done well, Witch of the Dusk...”

The boy slowly turned around, his eyes still closed. Then, his eyebrows rose with a questioning air. This was because a silver-colored spear and a girl of small stature rested in front of Kako.

“Yukina Himeragi. Why bring her here?”

“I secured her as a hostage to ensure Kojou Akatsuki accepted my invitation to Onrai Island. I beg thy forgiveness for acting on my own judgment.”

Kako bowed her head deeply as she pleaded for lenience.

The boy let out a light exhale that seemed like a sigh. “Very well. It is unnecessary to bind her. She will be treated with utmost respect.”

“As thou wilt.”

Kako bowed her head once more. Her voice carried a faint hint of relief. However, when Kako raised her face, the expression on it was a charming, businesslike smile, without a hint of any other emotion.

“May I hear thy report?” The boy spoke in a gentle tone.

Kako nodded. “Over these past three days, Kojou Akatsuki has experienced death a total of nine times. Unfortunately, at present, I cannot confirm any obvious effect on his personality.”

“Nine times...?”

Fewer than I was led to expect, said the boy’s silent criticism. Kako spoke quickly to vindicate herself.

“The intervention of Asagi Aiba resulted in the failure of the aforementioned attempt.”

“You are saying that she breached the defenses of Onrai Island? In a mere three days?”

“I am very sorry. It would appear she has analyzed the construction of the nano-automata as well.”

“Is that so?”

For the first time, surprise appeared on the young boy’s face.

Breaching a barrier world’s defenses should have been utterly impossible, via nano-automata or anything else. The technology employed by those *shikigami* was indecipherable. The reason was that there was no way for that era’s technology to decipher it. Apparently, Asagi Aiba had partially deciphered their secret.

“No, I mind not. Thou hast done well, Kako Magatoki.”

The boy slowly shook his head, seemingly brushing away his dismay. Then, he abruptly changed the subject.

“How does the creator fare?”

“Exhaustion of demonic energy has grown graver still, perhaps the effect of

repeated manipulation of time.”

Kako spoke steadily without any variance in her tone. The boy gave a gentle smile.

“The finale draws near, then.”

“Yes.”

“I shall leave drawing the final curtain to thy discretion. Do as thou pleasest,” he said softly.

Kako nodded with a satisfied smile. “I thank you, Primogenitor of the End—The Blood.”

Space itself swayed like a ripple, and Kako vanished from sight. The only ones left in the church were the boy and Yukina, continuing to sleep.

The boy turned back to the keyboard.

The melody that flowed from it was a solemn one, and the well-lit chamber was filled with what seemed like a lullaby—

CHAPTER FIVE
THE MIRAGE
PALADIN

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MIRAGE PALADIN

1

A humid breeze graced Kojou's cheek.

The air was filled with the thick scent of life. Trees and grasses, lichens and mushrooms, densely piled fallen leaves, and the microorganisms that propagated beneath. Beasts, too—this was the scent of a rain forest.

Kojou opened his eyes amid that powerful scent.

What he saw beneath his eyes was a muddy, watery surface. He seemed to have been snagged by tree roots along the bank while unconscious. He was in an open space at the edge of a swamp. He recognized the terrain.

This was the second stratum of Onrai Island's subterranean labyrinth.

It was where Yuno had been attacked by a Debris, and where Rui and Nozomi had been slain. *What is this, an auto-save point?* grumbled Kojou inside his mind.

As he grasped the circumstances, the first thing he remembered right away was Kako's smug smile as she abducted the then-unconscious Yukina. Kojou took deep, repeated breaths, somehow managing to subdue the demonic energy threatening to explode along with his anger.

That wasn't enough to quell his annoyance, but it did bring him back to rationality to some extent. All Kojou would achieve by giving in to his emotions and running amok would be to further amuse Kako.

What barely kept Kojou grounded in reason was his certainty that Yukina was in no immediate danger. If the intention was to hurt her, his adversaries would not have gone through the trouble of knocking her out and bringing her here.

Kako surely could have killed Yukina anytime she wished. He didn't really get why, but certain circumstances seemed to prevent Kako from harming her.

Pulling himself up with the help of unstable tree roots, Kojou somehow managed to set his feet onto solid ground.

From the feel of the tree bark to the unpleasantly humid air, it was terrifyingly real, indistinguishable from actual reality. This was no doubt the work of the nano-*shikigami* Asagi had mentioned. Even if he knew it was virtual reality in his mind, he could not completely divorce himself from the sensations being conveyed to his body. It seemed that there really was no way to completely escape from that world without dealing with the one Kako had termed its creator.

"I have finally found you, Kojou Akatsuki."

While Kojou leaned against a tree trunk with such thoughts in his mind, he suddenly heard someone calling his name.

The branches of densely packed trees parted, from which Shizuri emerged. At some point, she'd put on her wimple, and her long sword was sheathed as she gripped it in her right hand.

"Cas..."

"That's Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella to you!" She strictly corrected his address of her, but she looked relieved nonetheless. "It would seem you too were brought back to Onrai Island."

"Guess so... Dammit, what's that crappy instructor up to...?!"

His previously forgotten anger burning once more, Kojou audibly clenched his teeth, snapping the tree branch nearest him. Now that he knew it was a construct, he would tolerate no complaints about despoiling the environment.

"The saving grace is that our memories are intact, it would seem." Shizuri gave him a somewhat exasperated look as she spoke soberly.

Certainly, it would not have been strange for Kojou and Shizuri's memories to have been stolen exactly as she'd just implied. In that case, they might well have ended up reliving Onrai Island life from the auto-save point onward.

Clearly, that was preferable from Kako Magatoki's point of view. In other words, she couldn't do it even if she wanted to.

"Maybe it's because of the weird smoke Lydianne pumped out," Kojou murmured, unsure.

"Smoke?" Shizuri shot him a doubtful look.

However, given the circumstances, Kojou didn't think the smoke Asagi and Lydianne had spread was a normal smoke screen. If anything, it was far more natural to think that was some sort of nano-*shikigami* countermeasure.

"Maybe it was some kind of nano-*shikigami* vaccine or something. That'd be why we can enter the barrier, but we aren't getting inconvenient effects like having our memories altered or our abilities limited."

"Could such a high-end thing be produced in such a short amount of time?"

"Er, well, it seemed like even Asagi had a tough time with it this time around..."

"A 'tough time'..." Shizuri's mouth dropped open.

He could understand her disbelief. Kojou couldn't think of any other reason why Kako hadn't altered their memories.

"Well, I suppose we could chalk it up to that shitty instructor's whim, too." Kojou grimaced. It wasn't that he hadn't considered her not swiping their memories because it was simply too much trouble. Percentage-wise, that might have been the likelier reason.

"That 'shitty instructor'...deceived us all, did she not..."

Listening to Kojou's insult, Shizuri bit her lip and cast her eyes downward. The fact that someone she'd trusted had betrayed them no doubt still weighed upon her. Meddlesome to the core, that made Shizuri weak at detecting malice in others.

Shizuri was still like that when Kojou placed his hand on her head. He stroked her hair right through the wimple.

"Don't worry about her. It's not your fault you were tricked by her."

“P-please do not rub my head in that overly familiar manner! It is not as if I am depressed!”

She was no doubt well aware that the rubbing was consoling her. Shizuri’s face was red to the tips of her ears as she feverishly shook her head. Even so, she made no move to brush away the hand with which Kojou was stroking her head.

“Then fine. Saves me the time and trouble.” Kojou nodded in relief as his expression tightened.

Shizuri, acutely sensing the aggressive aura churning within him, sullenly narrowed her eyebrows. “Time and... Kojou, what exactly do you intend to do?”

“I told her already: I’ll give the creator of Onrai Island a beatdown and set the people living on this island free. Himeragi’s on my mind too, plus who else is gonna save Miyazumi and Amase?”

“Onrai Island’s...creator...” Shizuri prevaricated, hesitant. It didn’t feel like she was uncertain of something; rather, it felt like she wasn’t sure whether to say it out loud.

“Cas, do you know something?”

“I...have a suspicion of who the creator might be.”

Shizuri ignored his use of the nickname, sounding like she was mulling something over.

“Really...? Who?”

“The last Paladin of Gisella—Shinako Kasugaya. She saved my life, and she was the proper wielder of Hauras.”

“Shinako *Kasugaya*...?”

The name she spoke threw Kojou off a little. She was connected to Gisella and bore the name of Kasugaya, yet it was the first time Shizuri had spoken that name in front of Kojou. Upon further reflection, Kojou didn’t know a single thing about Shizuri’s family background.

Shizuri, sensing Kojou’s bewilderment, gave a little shake of her head.

“She is not my biological sister. I...took her family name for my own. I, an Ogre orphan knowing not even the faces of my parents, took up the name of Kasugaya.”

So that's it, thought Kojou, nodding silently. If those were her circumstances, he could understand the reason why Shizuri hadn't spoken a word to him about her family. He could also understand the pride she bore toward the name.

Kojou had a mountain of things he wanted to ask, but he posed the question he thought most crucial among them. “Err...what's your basis for thinking she's Onrai Island's creator, then?”

Shizuri firmly closed her eyes, as if trying to recall painful memories. “I am merely stating it is possible. Are you familiar with the city Iroise?”

“...The Demon Sanctuary in Europe, right? I heard it was Gisella's home base.”

Kojou gave the most basic answer he could. He did not mention Tartarus Lapse because he could not judge whether Shizuri knew of it or not. For that matter, it was possible she remained unaware that Iroise had been destroyed.

But Shizuri's next words brushed that last concern aside.

“Many of the residents of Onrai Island are likely survivors of Iroise, same as I.”

“Survivors?”

“Yes,” said Shizuri with a nod. “That day, we were at the harbor, waiting for an evacuation ship. Many Japanese school students and their families were gathered there waiting for an evacuation ship arranged by businessmen of Japanese descent. When everyone was relieved that a ship had finally arrived, huge Beast Vassals descended from the sky—”

“The Four Holy Beasts of Tartarus Lapse, huh...”

Kojou forgot himself as a pained expression came over him.

These were powerful phantom beasts summoned by absorbing vast quantities of spiritual energy from dragon lines, and the demonic energy of the Demon Sanctuary residents themselves. Having actually fought the Four Holy Beasts himself, Kojou was acutely aware of just how terrifying they were. As a resident of Iroise, Shizuri must have found encountering the Four Holy Beasts to

be nothing short of a nightmare.

“I...do not remember what happened after that.”

Shizuri gave a sad shake of her head.

“However, if, at the time, Shinako created Onrai Island and moved the evacuees to it, that would explain my survival.”

“So she created Onrai Island... Wait, could she even pull off something like that?” Kojou couldn’t help doubting that.

Creating a barrier world required skill in spatial-manipulation magic and a vast quantity of demonic energy. Even if Shinako Kasugaya, a proper paladin, knew spatial manipulation magic, he didn’t think she’d have the off-the-scale demonic power required to create Onrai Island.

“Shinako possessed the means to acquire the requisite demonic energy required.”

Shizuri lowered her gaze to her very own hand. In it, she gripped the long sword she said Shinako Kasugaya had entrusted to her. Hauras—the secret armament of Gisella that stole the demonic energy of the opponents it sliced, changing that into its own power.

“So she consumed the demonic energy of the Four Holy Beasts with Hauras...?” Kojou asked.

“Sí... probably.” Shizuri nodded tentatively.

Using the demonic energy of the Four Holy Beasts made constructing a barrier world possible. If Shizuri’s theory proved true, that meant Shinako Kasugaya had saved six thousand islanders—fortuitous news from Shizuri’s perspective.

Shizuri’s expression did not brighten. If Shinako Kasugaya was truly Onrai Island’s creator, why had she not freed the islanders now that the menace of Tartarus Lapse had passed? She did not know the reason why.

“The geography of this island, volcanic mountains excepted, greatly resembles that of the Demon Sanctuary of Iroise. How could I have forgotten even something like that...?” Shizuri murmured in a lost, forlorn tone of voice.

“I’m pretty sure that was the effect of the nano-*shikigami*. If they could even

alter the Fourth Primogenitor's memories, no way a normal person or Demon could fight it no matter how hard they tried," he said in an effort to console her. It was crude logic short on eloquence, but somewhat surprisingly, Shizuri made no rebuttal. Shaking her head, Shizuri seemed to brush her hesitance aside as she turned and stared straight at Kojou.

"The seventh stratum."

"...Huh?"

Kojou looked back at Shizuri with a bewildered face, unable to keep up with the dramatic leap in topic.

"That is both a place present on this island and a place one no one can reach. It is also the location of Onrai Island's most powerful concentration of demonic energy. If Shinako is truly present, that is where she will be."

"I see... The deepest part of the *Carceri*...!"

Kojou's expression unconsciously sharpened. There was no firm proof, but Kojou instinctively knew Shizuri's deduction was correct. The seventh stratum of the *Carceri*, a place no one had ever reached, was the perfect environment in which the creator of Onrai Island could lie low. The *Carceri* might well have existed not to shut the Debris in, but to protect that creator.

"It would seem my supposition that the creator is in the seventh stratum is correct..."

Shizuri made what seemed like a pained smile as she drew her sword.

Kojou realized it a second later. There, in a rain forest that was gloomy even at the height of day, black shadows were sloppily crawling toward them. It was a horde of the Larvae he'd grown far too accustomed to for his own liking.

"It feels kinda like someone doesn't want us getting close to the seventh stratum."

A dry laugh bubbled up at the horde of Larvae, vaster than any before it. The timing was far too good to be coincidental. There was no longer any room to doubt that Kako was controlling them.

Did she really not want Kojou and Shizuri to approach the seventh stratum no

matter what, or did she simply hate their guts? Either way, the pair had only a single option: to bust through.

“Stand back, Cas. I’ll do it.”

With a shimmer, demonic energy gushed out from Kojou’s every pore.

If that’s how Kako wanted it, Kojou was under no obligation to hold back. No matter how many Larvae pressed upon them, all he had to do was sweep them aside with a Beast Vassal. The wound gouged into him by Snowdrift Wolf had by no means completely healed, but it had erased the nano-*shikigami* interference. Kojou could sense that the Beast Vassals were there, ready to answer his call.

Perhaps overwhelmed by Kojou’s demonic energy, Shizuri backed up a step. From the right arm Kojou raised overhead, he unleashed particularly dense demonic energy. This became a crimson cloud, weaving the form of a huge Beast Vassal.

It was a moment later that tiny sparks were scattered within the rain forest.

“—Kojou!!”

While Kojou was preoccupied with the Larvae, the sniper-rifle bullet flew at supersonic speed, precisely slipping through gaps in the trees, and with pinpoint accuracy, punched through his heart.

2

Yukina awoke sitting on a chair.

It was an extravagant, antique chair fit for a queen. The armchair was upholstered entirely in red velvet fabric.

Faint light illuminated the chamber, vast and reminiscent of a church interior.

Yukina sat in the center of that chamber.

She was not bound. Her clothes were not askew. Her silver spear had been placed at her feet. Not even the damage from Kako Magatoki’s palm strike remained...aside from an unshakable sense of defeat.

The ceiling was high and arched. The walls had serene openwork sculptures placed against them.

The solemn reverberations of an organ echoed beautifully within the stonework structure.

A boy in a tailcoat was playing the organ.

His physique was as delicate as that of a girl of similar age. His hair was blond and seemed to flicker like a flame. His skin was white. *He looks like her*, thought Yukina.

She had not intended to be captivated by the boy for all that long, but at some point, his performance had apparently come to an end. Once he had played his final note, he turned around to face her.

“It seems you are awake, Yukina Himeragi.”

She shot to her feet as if she had been fired from a cannon, picking up the spear that had been laid beside her. Fear raced through her entire body, enough that if she did not summon all her willpower, she would not have been able to stand.

It was not that the boy was trying to overwhelm her. He was smiling pleasantly, in fact. Just like the very existence of a powerful weapon instilled fear in people, Yukina was instinctively afraid of the potential power resting within him.

“Who...are you?”

Yukina diligently kept her voice from trembling. She felt cold beads of sweat course down the nape of her neck.

“I call myself The Blood...the King of All Vampires, though the ‘King’ part is self-applied.”

The boy shook his head, speaking at his own expense.

Yukina was unsure of how to respond.

Given his title, she had no doubt he was a vampire. However, even to Yukina’s Sword Shaman eyes, his abilities seemed unfathomable, beyond any conjecture.

Yukina knew only two other people who gave off an air similar to his.

One was Giada Kukulkin, the Chaos Bride.

The other was Kojou Akatsuki.

“This is the center of Onrai Island, the seventh stratum of the subterranean labyrinth known as the *Carceri*. I had not anticipated inviting you here. Allow me to apologize for the mistake.”

His tone was gentle. On the surface, his apology did not seem like any kind of performance. The polite treatment he had given Yukina put weight behind his words.

“I take it you sponsored the Witch of the Dusk?” she asked in confirmation, lowering her spear.

She was still afraid of the boy, but she regained her composure, sensing that holding a conversation with a blade pointed toward him would be rude.

“You are indeed wise,” he politely said. “Yes. I am indeed Kako Magatoki’s client. I have provided her with a portion of my nano-automata technology and a temporal manipulation ritual grimoire as recompense.”

“Temporal manipulation ritual...?!” Yukina’s expression froze in surprise.

Magic to control the flow of time was considered super-advanced, on par with teleportation. As far as Yukina knew, only Koyomi Shizuka, aka Paper Noise, had completely mastered the art. If Kako Magatoki could employ temporal manipulation, it meant she possessed a power equal to that of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency. She must have been the one to warp the flow of time for Onrai Island.

“The power granted to the Witch of the Dusk is not as convenient as you might believe.” The boy smiled. She suspected that was out of consideration for her fright.

“Within a world one perceives as real, such as Onrai Island, it might be possible to experience months of time in only a few hours, but in the real world, her influence would be restricted to her own mind and body at most. Well, I suppose such compensation is only fitting, given the job I hired her to do.”

“Job...?”

Yukina shot the boy a reproachful look. As the one who had hired Kako Magatoki to do this job, he was the ringleader behind the current uproar. That meant it was him, not Kako, who had been the impetus for Kojou becoming involved in the incident.

The boy calmly accepted Yukina’s stare, nodding without a single shred of guilt.

“Do not be concerned. I have no intention of harming Kojou Akatsuki. In the first place, it is impossible to harm an immortal such as him—am I mistaken?”

“You might be correct, physically at least.” Yukina coldly glared at the boy.

“Hmph,” said the boy, looking pleased. “Precisely. Even if his body is immutable and eternal, his spirit is not. If wounds were to make him forget that spirit, even his mind would completely turn into that of a monster.” He lowered his voice. “Therefore...why not break him before that happens?”

“...Break him?”

In contrast to the weight of his words, the boy continued with an almost casual air.

“Yes. He should know the fear and despair of losing the ones he loves. He should know overwhelming despair and regret sufficient to crush his soul. Wounds that will never heal should be carved into his mind before he ultimately succumbs to weakness...before his softness invites the worst of all possible results.”

“You cannot mean...this is why you had him brought to Onrai Island...?!” she reproached.

The boy nodded deeply. “In these three days, he has experienced death nine times. During the course of this, he has lost many comrades. These include friends with which he trained as fellow Attack Mage candidates, reliable seniors, and perhaps someone he might even call his lover?”

He sounded amused, though indifferent, as if speaking of the untimely deaths of people—people he knew by name—like they were strangers. To him, Kojou’s

anguish was someone else's problem.

"He does not remember. However, he subconsciously accumulates the memories. They are surely eating away at his mind from within, like a slow, long-acting poison."

"When you say the Witch of the Dusk's work...you intend to allow her to kill Miss Kasugaya?"

Yukina realized what the boy was after. Because Kojou possessed an immortal body, his greatest fear was not that he would be hurt—it was that he would lose the people around him. Through the artificial world known as Onrai Island, the boy had given Kojou close friends. The boy had given him these comforts for the sole purpose of ripping them away.

And at that moment in time, the one in the position closest to Kojou was no doubt Shizuri. Killing her would wound Kojou's spirit. That was the request the boy had placed in Kako's hands.

"A Prison Barrier is a world materializing in the creator's dream. So long as it is within a dream, the dead can be resurrected any number of times. However, I will make Kojou Akatsuki end the dream world of his own volition. The tragedy that decision summons forth shall not leave him unscathed, I imagine."

"I will not allow you do as you please, The Blood." Yukina tightened her grip on her spear.

In the real world, the environment surrounding Kojou had not changed in the slightest. Kojou had his little sister, the one he loved most, and his other family. He had his allies, including Yukina, on Itogami Island—*the combat strength wielded by the Fourth Primogenitor* was maintained, undamaged.

On the other hand, if he lost Shizuri, Kojou would most definitely be hurt. Using that wound to warp Kojou's personality, altering it in a direction more convenient to himself—this was The Blood's desire.

"Yukina Himeragi, do you intend to save Shizuri Kasugaya?"

Even with Yukina's spear turned toward him, the boy's expression did not change. With that beautiful, charming smile still on his face, he turned a finger toward the church's altar.

“Then, I shall warn you that such an attempt is futile. You cannot save her. Of course, neither can you save Kojou Akatsuki.”

“No, it’s not possible...”

A wooden box resembling a casket lay open on the altar.

Amid the flowers packed within the wooden box, a single woman rested within. She was young and wearing a long wimple, clutching a long sword against her chest. Realizing her identity, Yukina was at a loss for words.

“No... How...?”

“Please convey what you see here to Kojou Akatsuki. Hate me. Fear the name of The Blood—”

The boy’s tone changed ever so slightly. It was a solemn tone befitting his right and proper power.

Within Yukina’s own cognizance, the contours of the boy, still sitting in the chair, flickered. It was neither illusion, nor spatial manipulation. Yukina realized that he was employing a more frightening power to depart from that world.

“Wait! Please, The Blood! Wait!”

Yukina wondered whether she should use her spear to nullify his power by force—and that hesitation, lasting for not even a tenth of one second, meant her chance to hold him in that world had been lost for eternity.

Enveloped by a phantasmal light that resembled an aurora, the boy vanished from sight.

“We shall meet again, Yukina Himeragi. On the day of reckoning that shall inevitably arrive—”

Dumbfounded, Yukina stood rooted in place as the last of the boy’s words echoed in her ears for some time.

3

From Kojou’s back burst flesh, blood, and rib fragments. He’d been sniped at long range using an anti-demon silver iridium-tipped bullet. Kojou and Shizuri

knew only one person from Onrai Island capable of the shot.

“Rui?! Why?!” Shizuri exclaimed as she clutched the wobbly Kojou to her. She couldn’t believe their ally could do such a thing.

“Kojou! Hang in there, Kojou!”

Caring nothing for how it sullied her coat, Shizuri desperately propped Kojou up. The shocking spectacle before her eyes had no doubt rendered her knowledge of Kojou’s immortality meaningless. As a matter of fact, the wound was so grave that any vampire short of a primogenitor might well have perished instantly.

“...Well, that figures. They ain’t gonna let us get to the bottom of the *Carceri* that easy,” he murmured between pained breaths. He sounded calm, casual—like this didn’t affect him personally.

He coughed up blood.

“Is this the time to act composed?!” she shouted in a frenzy.

When Kojou tried to lift up his face, Shizuri forced him back down. She was on guard for Rui’s second shot.

Certainly, lying on the surface of the ground made sniping them more difficult. But during that time, the horde of Larvae closed the range. The sniper was there to support the Larvae.

“I’m glad, though,” Kojou said.

“Wha—?!”

“I don’t know if it’s regeneration or resurrection, but I mean, Miyazumi—he’s alive.”

“That’s...!”

Kojou’s completely unexpected assertion silenced Shizuri. Even if his memory had been altered, confirmation that Rui had survived was without doubt good news.

“Gotta say, though, that damn teacher got us good. If that’s how the other side wants it, time our side got serious, too. No worrying about holding back.”

Enduring the pain of his wounds, Kojou thrust his right arm out. The previously impeded process of summoning his Beast Vassal was completed in an instant, and a mass of incredible demonic energy appeared without warning.

“C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Two, Cor-Tauri Succinum!”

Everything around them looked warm from an amber glow. A ferocious heat wave blew forth.

Kojou had summoned a minotaur borne from incandescent magma.

Splitting the ground with its enormous ax, the torrent of magma that gushed forth mowed the rain forest down. Of course, the horde of mere Larvae was burned away without a trace. It was a crude method he had used because he knew Rui the sniper was nowhere close.

“This is... This is the true power of the Fourth Primogenitor...”

Shizuri blinked, forgetting herself as she stared at the sight of Kojou’s rampaging Beast Vassal.

A fair percentage of the rain forest had already been reduced to ash, and the flames spread, burning more still. The power of the Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor had altered the topography in an instant, causing the entirety of Onrai Island to shudder.

“Well, yeah... Ergh... This is tougher than I thought...”

As he released his summons, Kojou collapsed in a heap. Even though vampire primogenitors boasted immortal bodies, sustaining enough damage to send the heart flying took an appropriate number of hours to heal. If his blood circulation remained stopped, his physical movement would naturally be hindered. At the moment, it took all Kojou’s focus to remain conscious.

“Kojou...your wound...!”

“That’s ’cause that jerk Rui really pumped one into me good.”

The backlash from summoning the Beast Vassal caused the once-relenting bleeding to grow fiercer once more.

In addition to Rui’s sniping, his wound from Yukina’s Snowdrift Wolf had yet to completely heal. Kojou was in a worse state than he’d anticipated.

Even so, Kojou felt some measure of relief that the horde of Larvae had been swept away. The conflagration caused by his Beast Vassal had also made the air unreliable. Even Rui would be unable to keep sniping with his vision like that.

However, before Kojou and Shizuri could devise a way to flee under cover of smoke, a new menace emerged overhead.

“It’s not over, Cas! Incoming!”

“Beast Vassal...?!”

Shizuri’s expression twisted out of shock. Beating away the black smoke covering the sky, a harpy enveloped in flame was heading straight for Kojou and Shizuka. It was Nozomi Kamikiba’s Therese.

“Don’t tell me, even Kamikiba has been...?!”

The Beast Vassal assaulting them gave Shizuri no time to recover from her inner turmoil as she slammed her long sword into it.

Normal physical attacks were ineffective against Beast Vassals, as they were masses of demonic energy. But Shizuri’s beloved sword easily bit into that Beast Vassal’s flesh. With the initial strike, the blade consumed the opponent’s demonic energy; with the second, power-augmented strike, it sliced through the harpy’s torso. Its own demonic energy consumed, the harpy’s enormous body was sent flying.

“Cas, get down!”

Immediately after Shizuri finished her attack, something flew over Kojou from behind. Shizuri rolled to the ground spectacularly, but she did not have any free time to speak a word of complaint, for as she tumbled, a metal boot just barely grazed past the top of her head.

“Yuno?! ”

Yuno, who’d approached under cover of smoke, unleashed a spin kick with the agility distinctive of beast people. Shizuri blocked it with the scabbard of her sword. The left and right hooks that followed sent Shizuri rolling to dodge them.

They were movements without a single shred of elegance fit for a paladin, but the situation was too dire for her to care. Losing sight of her target, Yuno’s fists

cut through the air. That wasn't all, though...

“Haaaaaaaaaaa—!!”

Shizuri somehow managed to block the great sword that Okurayama swung down with a mighty war cry. The force of the blow, as if a massive boulder had crashed down, racked both her arms with a searing pain. If Hauras had not just consumed the demonic energy of Nozomi's Beast Vassal, it might well have split asunder. Such was the incredible blunt force of the blow.

“Ughh—Hauras!”

Making the long sword emit all its remaining demonic energy, Shizuri blasted Okurayama back. His huge frame collided with Yuno, sending both tumbling to the ground in a heap.

Shizuri got nervous as she stared at Hauras. Having wrung out all its demonic energy, the long sword's blade had lost most of its luster. In its present state, Hauras probably could not withstand Okurayama's next attack.

“No, you did great, Cas! C'mon over, Natra Cinereus!”

Wobbly from blood loss, Kojou wrung out the last of his strength as he embraced Shizuri and held her close.

All sight of the pair was obscured by silver mist. It was the transformation into mist ability distinctive of vampires—

Spawned by a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, it spread across the area with ferocious vigor, completely burying the greater portion of the second stratum of the *Carceri* in dense mist that reduced visibility to zero.

4

“Vampiric mist transformation... To think you could cover an area this vast...”

Shizuri's eyes were still wide with fear and awe as she sank down to her butt on rocky ground.

The dense mist spawned by Kojou's Beast Vassal had dissipated as suddenly as it had sprung forth. However, they had not materialized in the same place as

she had initially been. They had moved while still transformed to escape Okurayama and company's pursuit.

"This should buy us a little time..."

Still lying faceup, his energy seemingly spent, Kojou spoke in a frail, raspy voice.

They had moved several kilometers at most, but they'd done so while Kojou kept the *Carceri* covered in mist so that none might see. Even opponents of Okurayama and the others' caliber surely wouldn't be able to catch up immediately.

"You certainly have a point...", she agreed, but she was tentative anyway.

She surveyed the landscape around them with a somewhat cold look. The walls wet from humidity...the white steam...the distinctive scent wafting up from the water's surface...the bath water maintained at a temperature of forty-one degrees Celsius...and, finally, the changing rooms divided by gender—she and Kojou were both familiar with this open hot spring bath.

"So why go straight to OS Base?"

"I couldn't think of anywhere else we could take a breather. It wasn't that I was aiming for a hot spring specifically..." He looked awkward despite defending himself.

OS Base was on the first stratum of the *Carceri*. As a matter of fact, he had not chosen that place as their destination out of any special motive in mind. To Kojou, a *Carceri* neophyte, it was the one and only observation post he was familiar with; that was all.

"Well, let us set that aside for the moment. Besides, we should be able to replenish supplies here."

A somewhat suspicious look still hovered on her face, but Shizuri made a show of shrugging her shoulders, seemingly having no intention of pressing the point further. The provisions officer of an observation post kept it stocked with every type of ammunition in use. It wasn't a bad choice for Kojou and Shizuri, neither of whom was carrying proper gear at the moment.

“First, treatment is necessary, I imagine. I will be right back with a first aid kit,” Shizuri said before heading to the changing rooms.

Kojou’s blown-out lungs and heart had already begun to regenerate, but he still couldn’t move properly. Even having bandages wrapped around him and nothing else would probably provide some peace of mind at the very least.

Just when she was arriving at the changing room entrance, Shizuri halted in apparent surprise.

The door to the changing rooms had vanished. Not only the changing room door, but the entire observation post structure was nowhere to be seen. There was only a collapsed structure, abandoned and left to rot for what seemed like decades.

“How...?!”

Shizuri’s face went pale at the sudden change in the base, impossible through natural phenomena. Someone had altered time through deliberate action.

The aging of the base had caused its stock of medical products and ammunition to rot, rendering them unusable. The aim had likely been not to hinder Kojou’s treatment but to stop them from obtaining weapons.

This was not Kako Magatoki’s doing. Had it been, she would surely have had Larvae attack directly rather than use a roundabout method like aging the facility.

“The will of the creator, I’ll bet. Really doesn’t want us getting to the lowest stratum, it looks like.”

The enemy’s oh-so-blatant handiwork brought a pained, slightly exasperated smile over Kojou. He felt like he was clearly sensing the heretofore ambiguous creator for the very first time. All over again, it sank in that Onrai Island was a world created according to someone’s will. And then—

“I am...thoroughly fed up...!” Shizuri muttered under her breath toward the creator who’d intervened seemingly out of spite.

Kojou’s expression hardened as he imagined he heard a lid suddenly ripped off and sent flying. Shizuri’s shoulders trembled as she gritted her teeth.

Perhaps truly feeling the creator's existence had given her an outlet for all the anger that had been piling higher and higher up to that point. An aura of seething rage was gushing out, flicking around her entire body.

"C-Cas?" Kojou called out meekly.

Shizuri stripped her coat off right before his eyes. Next, she removed and cast aside the school uniform jacket, too, popping the buttons of her blouse out one by one. Then, after a brief pause, she plucked off the wimple she was wearing. Her long, pure-white hair spread with a flutter, leaving her jade horns exposed.

"Wait a... Cas, what the hell are you doing?!"

Flustered, Kojou had no clue why she was acting this way.

Shizuri swung around powerfully, glaring straight at Kojou. Thanks to the collar of her blouse being wide open, the white nape of her neck, her collarbone, and even the cleavage of her modest breasts were on full display.

With Kojou lying faceup, Shizuri proceeded to mount him.

"What you were about to do with Kamikiba?!"

Shizuri brushed her hair away from the nape of her neck. Her eyes were aggressive, but there was no hint of desperation within them. Her serene expression, bolstered by a clear sense of duty, was the same as always. If he had to note a difference, it would be the seemingly embarrassed reddening of her cheeks.

"Are you saying you want me to drink your blood...?" he asked in a daze as he stared at her.

Certainly, now that obtaining weapons and ammunition was no longer an option, healing the wounded Kojou was their one way of breaking out of the corner into which they had been backed. However, he'd never thought for one second that the stubborn, self-styled paladin would be the one to suggest such a thing.

Then, perhaps as a roundabout way of brushing off Kojou's question, Shizuri drew her face closer to Kojou's with visible annoyance.

"A-are you dissatisfied?! Certainly, compared with Kamikiba, my breasts are

small, and I have no experience in such things, but—”

“Erm, well, with the way you’ve acted, I’d be more shocked if you actually had any experience in this area...”

“I—I did not mean *that* kind of experience! Ah, er, I do not mean as in, my not being a virgin, though of course I do not have such experience either...”

As Kojou teased her to conceal his own embarrassment, Shizuri’s entire body blushed intensely when she realized just what she had confessed. Eyes bashful and tearful, she put her hands around Kojou’s neck.

“D-die—!!”

“You’re the one who spilled the beans, dammit!” Kojou let out a suppressed yelp as Shizuri fervently wrung his neck.

A moment later, Kojou, blanched from labored breaths and blood loss, felt warm droplets fall onto his cheek.

He suddenly realized that strength had drained from both of Shizuri’s hands. Her firm expression had contorted into a bare, timid face appropriate for the girl’s age. A flood of tears coursed down her cheeks, falling on Kojou like rain.

“Please... I have nothing else I can offer you...”

Shizuri’s voice trembled as she sobbed.

“This is our fault... I know this is selfish of me to say after involving you in Gisella’s and Iroise’s problems. But please. Lend us a little more of your strength...”

The girl let her head hang frailly. Kojou watched her in silence.

Her white hair, containing no trace of any other color. Her skin, white as the very snow. Even with her face contorted and wet from tears, Shizuri was an attractive girl indeed. Her beauty was not in her appearance but in her soul.

It was not for her own sake she sought Kojou’s aid, but that of Iroise’s six thousand captive islanders. Even if she thought of herself as a false paladin, she had never ceased acting like one. Her obstinate, awkward way of living overlapped with the image of Kojou’s other observer just a little.

Mixing a pained smile with an exhale, he gently stretched his hands out toward her and then...

“Ack!”

Shizuri let out a cry as her entire body twitched and went rigid. Kojou’s left and right hands were each touching one of Shizuri’s horns.

“Wh-where do you think you are touching?!”

“I was right. These horns really are pretty. They’re smooth to the touch, like they’re drawing in the tips of your fingers,” Kojou said as he stroked Shizuri’s horns with his fingers. He thought her reaction was rather dramatic.

Apparently, her horns were not simply part of her bones but sensitive organs like the tusk of a narwhal.

“Th-those are sensory organs that detect auras and demonic energy! Don’t touch them so firmly or—!!”

Kojou stroked Shizuri’s horns more gently this time. Shizuri bit her lip as she endured the stimulation, the ticklish mixed with the unsavory. Her breathing became shallow, quickening as her flushed cheeks grew sweaty. Finally, her strength seemingly exhausted, she slumped against Kojou in a heap. *Maybe I overdid it*, reflected Kojou, realizing that her entire body was twitching.

Fortunately, there was no sign of Shizuri having actually lost consciousness. Combing her white hair upward, Kojou smiled powerfully as he whispered right into her ear.

“Don’t go saying stuffy things like *lend us your strength* after all this, Squad Leader. We were both wrapped up in this a long time ago. Let’s send that shitty instructor flying and save everyone... Himeragi and all of Onrai Island’s people.”

“Yeah.” Shizuri weakly nodded.

Kojou gently drew his lips to the white, defenseless nape of her neck. His bared, tapered fangs punctured her sweat-drenched skin, and fresh blood trickled out.

“Thank you, Kojou—”

Kojou sank his fangs into Shizuri, listening to her voice, no longer coherent,

until the very end.



Shizuri had not lost consciousness for even ten minutes. Realizing that she was still resting on top of Kojou, she hastily hopped up and collected the tunic she had herself stripped off.

Kojou had already finished regenerating the heart that Rui had blown away. The wound from Snowdrift Wolf was gone, too. Upon confirming this, Shizuri let out a sigh of relief.

“I believe you understand, but not one word of this to anyone?”

Averting her eyes, those were the first words she spoke to Kojou.

“You mean earlier? If you mean whether you’re a virgin or n—”

“No! I mean the a-activity you and I engaged in!” Shizuri angrily shouted at Kojou with enough force, she seemed ready to bite his head off.

“Ohhh.” He sluggishly shrugged. “I won’t tell. By the way, Cas, your underwear is surprisingly cute.”

“I-I’ll kill you!!”

Shizuri hid the frilled bra visible from her open collar as she put a hand to her sword.

“W-wait, calm down, you idiot!”

Sensing her bloodlust, Kojou leaped back; that instant, something tumbled from his uniform’s pocket. It was an electronic device small enough to fit in a palm.

“What’s this...?”

Shizuri kept her sword drawn as her eyes rested upon the machine. It was a rectangle with rounded corners reminiscent of a large eraser—a plastic panic buzzer.

“Come to think of it, that shitty instructor gave this to me, didn’t she...?” Kojou grimaced as he picked up the panic buzzer and stared at it.

It wasn't that he had no suspicions. How had Shizuri and Kako been able to track Kojou so precisely after he'd returned to Itogami Island? How had Rui and the others determined Kojou's location inside the rain forest?

"Perhaps that is not a panic buzzer but a tracking device instead?"

"That jerk got me good...!"

Kojou threw the panic buzzer to the ground and proceeded to violently crush it underfoot. The cheap plastic case was crushed with ease, scattering its internal components all around.

"So they must have realized we fled here a long time ago. We should go—and quickly."

"No. Unfortunately, it's too late for that," Shizuri said as she peeked through a crack in a rotted wall.

Stepping into the base-turned-abandoned-cabin, Kojou unwittingly let out a sigh.

Countless humanoid silhouettes were standing on the rocky ground all around the base. Most of the corporate-hired guards were *cast* as being garrisoned at Onrai Island. Kojou saw recognizable faces to and fro. They were probably the college's *Carceri* search team.

"It feels like Onrai Island's entire population is in the *Carceri* now."

Kojou raised his voice in annoyance. He had no doubt that Kako, judging that Larvae weren't going to get the job done, had instigated them to attack instead.

As a matter of fact, her means were very effective. The far-too-powerful Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were largely useless in combat against human beings. Kojou might have been fine with burning Larvae away, but he could not help but hesitate to do the same against living human beings. The fact they were being controlled made that doubly so.

"You cannot turn into mist and escape like before?"

Shizuri looked up at Kojou as she posed the question. Faced with her expectation-filled eyes, Kojou grimaced slightly.

"Ah... About that... I *can* do that, but whether we'll end up exactly like we

started is a bit iffy, you see. Even without that, the space here is kind of unstable...”

“You involved me in an ability that risky...?!”

Shizuri glared at Kojou aghast. He awkwardly averted his eyes. If he used the Beast Vassal of mist transformation there, it was certain that the assailants outside would be caught up in it. If it was just Kojou and Shizuri, fine, but he didn’t think the Beast Vassal would restore people with enmity toward Kojou, its host, to their original forms. After all, indiscriminate destruction and slaughter were the true nature of the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.

That said, if they didn’t do anything, the situation would only worsen. The assailants had already finished surrounding the base. Even if they were to try and break through, some kind of trigger was required.

“This is getting pretty bad...”

Here and there, Kojou could see people bearing rocket launchers, machine guns, and other heavy weapons among the assailants. If bathed in concentrated fire, Kojou had no confidence he could protect Shizuri—or even himself.

“Shit...!”

Kojou resolved to summon a Beast Vassal, sink or swim. In virtually the same moment, Shizuri narrowed her eyes, realizing that something was off. Above the heads of the assailants surrounding the base, several gun shells sailed, scattering white smoke. They were smoke rounds from a tank.

“What the...?!”

Enveloped by smoke and seemingly in a daze, the assailants’ movements came to a stop.

Kojou knew this sight, as if they’d suddenly awoken from a dream. He’d seen the same look on Shizuri’s face when she woke up free of the nano-*shikigami*’s spell back in the clinic room.

“Kojou! Look!”

“Eh?!”

Turning his eyes in the direction Shizuri pointed, Kojou let out a little voice. He

realized that a crimson robot tank was approaching, scattering smoke rounds as it did.

“Sir Boyfriend! Lady Cas!”

They could hear Lydianne’s voice, altered to sound deep and throaty, coming from the external speakers. The robot tank resembling a tortoise deftly moved its four legs, sprinting across rocky ground with surprising speed. They also beheld the sight of Asagi stylishly seated sideways across its back.

The assailants in their dazed state made no move to bar the girls’ path. The time required for the robot tank to arrive at Kojou and Shizuri’s position was not all that long.

“So you are both safe. ’Twould seem that we have made it in time.”

Joints stiffly creaked as the crimson tank came to a halt.

“So you two were thrown over here, too...?”

Kojou was still standing stiff and dumbfounded as he somehow opened his mouth. It seemed that the gate Kako had forced open in the clinic room had indeed enveloped Asagi and Lydianne, tank and all.

“Indeed. We have been searching everywhere for thee. Though I must say, this Onrai Island is a place of great natural beauty.”

“I feel sorry for worrying about you when you were spending months on a southern climate island like this. I suppose you have some really juicy memories of this place?”

Asagi glared with half-lidded eyes at how Shizuri was standing so close to Kojou. She had an artificial smile on her face as she posed the question, like she wasn’t actually smiling at all. Kojou’s expression contorted into a bitter one.

“Like hell. How many times do you think I died here? I had to do exercises that made no sense; I had a fussy person watching everything I did... It wasn’t amusing one bit!”

“This is not the time to speak of such things. More importantly, what was that smoke just now?!”

Shizuri posed the question to silence the trivial verbal argument that had

begun between Kojou and Asagi.

“‘Tis ANN.”

Kojou raised an eyebrow at Lydianne’s far-too-curt explanation. “...ANN?”

“Anti-nano-shikigami nano-shikigami —they are nano-shikigami that nullify other nano-shikigami . After spreading a certain number of them about, they engage in self-propagation. We have calculated that in half a day, all the original nano-shikigami in this world will be nullified. As the ANN shall automatically annihilate themselves if their nano-shikigami prey are not present; thou needst not be concerned about side effects.”

“I don’t really get it, but it sounds like a nano-*shikigami* ’s mortal enemy.” Kojou nodded, having understood the gist.

So the smoke barrage Lydianne had used back in the clinic room really had nullified the nano-*shikigami*, preventing Kojou and Shizuri from being brainwashed.

“But,” Asagi explained, “releasing the residents of Onrai Island from the nano-*shikigami* doesn’t rescue them from the island. In the end, the nano-*shikigami* are nothing but a support system, separate from the magic that created the barrier world.”

Kojou had assumed as much. “Meaning that in the end, gotta smack the barrier world’s creator around in person.”

“—If that is the case, maybe it’s my turn next?”

Kojou and Shizuri heard a voice from behind and the air seemed to shimmer like a mirage. Appearing there was a faceless blue knight carrying a short-haired girl.

“Yuuma! You’re safe, too!”

When Yuuma dropped down from the blue knight’s arms, she and Kojou greeted each other with a high five. Except for Yukina, all the people present at the clinic room had been confirmed safe and sound.

“It’s thanks to the thinning of the nano-*shikigami* density reducing the power of the creator’s influence. At this point, I can move around this world freely to

some extent through my own power alone. Your destination is the stratum at the bottom of this underground labyrinth, right?”

“Can you transport us there?”

“As far as the entrance. Probably.”

Yuuma looked back at the surprised Kojou, showing off a smile with a twinge of pride. Kojou and Shizuri exchanged a glance; both nodded to each other.

“Sorry, but us two are busting out of here ahead of you,” Asagi said, keeping things realistic. “If this world’s going to collapse, we need to at least be somewhat prepared over in the real world, right? If the nano-*shikigami* completely stop working, a large-scale barrier like this won’t hold for long.”

“Mm. And Hizamaru’s battery neareth its limit.”

Onrai Island would soon collapse. Kako Magatoki had acknowledged as much. The effect from the anti-nano-*shikigami* nano-*shikigami* was only speeding up that process by the slightest of margins.

To be blunt, not even Kojou and the others knew what would happen when Onrai Island collapsed, but if six thousand people were suddenly cast into the real world, some kind of countermeasures surely needed to be employed beforehand. Failure to do so would result in enormous tragedy. Now that they’d finished spreading the ANN around, Asagi and Lydianne had nothing left they needed to do in that world.

“Got it. You two head back first.”

“Sorry about that. For that matter, you all come back soon, okay?”

“Please convey our best regards to Lady Sword Shaman.”

“Leave it to me,” said Kojou, displaying a nod to Asagi and Lydianne, who somehow sounded concerned as they spoke. Asagi, who had a worried expression hovering over her even so, gasped and lifted her face, almost as if she’d suddenly remembered something.

“More importantly, Kojou. You’re not actually thinking you can go drinking Yuuma’s and Kasugaya’s blood just because Himeragi and I aren’t around, are you? S-so indecent...!”

“What the—?! I’m not drinking any more blood, geez!”

“Any *more*...?!”

“Yuuma, please.” Kojou joined his hands with Yuuma’s before Asagi could say even more unnecessary things.

“Well, all right.” Yuuma strained a grin, commanding her Guardian to open the gate.

Asagi was still facing Kojou, trying to say something to him, but she was swallowed up by the shimmering hole bored into thin air. She immediately vanished from sight, returning to Itogami Island.

“...Your friends are good people,” Shizuri said, smiling.

Watching Asagi and Lydianne vanish along with the ruckus, Shizuri smiled in apparent amusement as she spoke.

“I wonder about that,” Kojou muttered, shrugging his shoulders, his face tired. “I think they’ll become your friends, too, as soon as we return to that world.”

“...That would be most splendid.”

Kojou thought she sounded so lonely. He glanced back with a questioning look. As she hung her head, he was unable to read her true thoughts. Yuuma silently watched Kojou and Shizuri remain like that for a brief time.

“Let’s go, Kojou. The truth awaits,” Yuuma gently said after a while.

With that, she opened the gate to the depths of the *Carceri*.

6

Once the boy calling himself a king had departed the church, Yukina was all alone, standing rooted to the spot.

She could vaguely guess the reason why the nucleus of the barrier world dubbed Onrai Island was a church.

This was because the church was a scene from the memories of Onrai Island’s

creator.

The church's religious imagery greatly resembled that of the Lotharingian Orthodox Church. The minor differences in design were no doubt due to the imagery being that of the heretical faction known as Gisella.

In other words, the creator of Onrai Island was somehow related to Gisella.

“.....”

Without a word, Yukina approached the wooden box resting upon the altar.

The corpse of a woman had been placed within the box. Yukina did not recognize the face of the woman, still beautiful in her eternal slumber. She was a young woman in her mid-twenties or so.

She wore a white coat and a wimple. The hair peeking through the gaps of the wimple was close-cropped and *black*.

Furthermore, the woman held against her chest only the scabbard of a long sword. The scabbard, broader than that of a normal sword, was no doubt constructed to accommodate a special, rippling blade.

When she read the characters stitched to adorn the back of the wimple, Yukina grew grave.

“...Shinako...Kasugaya...”

She could not sense the presence of a soul from the decomposing-yet-beautiful woman. She was most certainly dead. This showed that it was not possible for her to have been Onrai Island's creator.

There was only one person left on Onrai Island who was connected to Gisella —

That instant, Yukina understood the whole of the secret Onrai Island kept hidden.

She clenched her silver spear, captive to a sadness that had nowhere to go.

It was the next moment that explosive demonic energy welled up outside the church, shaking Onrai Island.

This was the power of Severing, which could rend the world itself asunder—

This was demonic energy from a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“C’mon over, Minelauva Iris—!”

The enormous Valkyrie summoned by Kojou slammed her rainbow-colored sword of light into the barrier on the fifth stratum of the *Carceri*. The thick, bulwark-like barrier was shattered to smithereens with that single blow.

Aftershocks from that slicing blow ferociously made the entire *Carceri* quake, causing walls and pillars propping up the fifth stratum to crumble. Fearful of being caught up in a cave-in, Kojou and the others hurried to advance deeper still.

Shizuri looked back at the collapsing tunnel behind them as she spoke in a sober tone of voice. “...I had never imagined I would be entering the deepest part of the *Carceri* in a manner such as this.”

She seemed to finally be accustomed to the mass destruction wrought by Kojou’s Beast Vassals. Her voice was neither angry nor exasperated, tinged only with an air of resignation.

The area ahead, the cavern sealed by the bulwark, became a stonework chamber. It was by no means broad. In spite of that, Kojou’s vision grew hazy at the edges, making it unclear to the naked eye just how far they had yet to go—the chamber was strange like that.

Kojou had heard that the interior of the bulwark was a nest of Debris, but none were present. The center of the open space contained only a single structure: a small building resembling a church. It seemed that this was the end point of the *Carceri*.

“*Carceri*...hmm,” Yuuma murmured. The gloomy way she spoke made Kojou and Shizuri turn toward her.

“The word *Carceri* means ‘prison’ in Italian.”

“...Prison?”

Kojou and Shizuri glanced at each other’s faces.

Had there truly been a nest of Debris in that place, neither would have questioned the term. A term for “prison” meaning a cage for Debris would have

felt completely apt.

However, there were no Debris. If they were purely under Kako Magatoki's control, that was only natural. Then, who was being held captive in that prison...?

A voice that seemed to have a sarcastic laugh mixed in provided the answer to Kojou's question.

"That's right. And the person inside that prison...is a criminal."

A witch wearing a black dress as if she was in mourning emerged, seemingly melting into Kojou's hazy vision. It was Kako Magatoki.

"Instructor Magatoki...!"

Shizuri instantly put her hand to the hilt of her sword. As she went on guard, Kako narrowed her eyes and looked back in amusement.

"I don't mind if you call me Kako."

"Oh shut up, you shitty instructor!" Kojou yelled, emphasizing his vile insult toward her. "So you're the one controlling it all...the Larvae and the Debris and all the people of Onrai Island... I bet you're the one who sent Miyazumi and Amase after us, too!"

He locked eyes with Kako, and he glared at her the whole time.

Through dispersal of nano-*shikigami*, she'd stolen the islanders' memories and made them internalize the means of manipulating their senses. If the purpose was maintaining the prison barrier, no such function was necessary. In other words, the nano-*shikigami* existed not to construct Onrai Island, but they had been brought onto the island *to hijack it*.

"Onrai Island is a much smaller place...a reproduction of Iroise's scenery, a little peaceful world, wasn't it? Larvae and Debris didn't exist here. It's you people who took it over, turning it into a scary place with the College of Magical Arts and the underground labyrinth, right?"

"As that was what the sponsor hired me to do...," Kako said without a single iota of guilt. From her words, Kojou knew that his deduction was correct.

"Sponsor...?"

“Yes. The magic known as a Prison Barrier is so convenient. No matter how much you kill or destroy, you can rebuild it over and over.” Kako languidly flipped up her dirty blond hair. “Thanks to that, it was easy to fulfill the sponsor’s request.”

Her replying to Kojou’s questions so politely was not an action inspired by an amiable spirit. She spoke because knowing the truth would hurt Kojou and the others even more.

“The request...was to instill despair in you. How did it feel to have your comrades die before your eyes one after the other?”

“What did...you just say...?” Kojou let out a low growl.

In the back of his mind arose the sights of Rui and Okurayama losing their lives right before him. Even if they were the virtual deaths of people who would return with magic, their fear and pain were real. If those things had been arranged solely to instill despair in Kojou, it was an altogether too heartless and cruel way to speak of them.

Kako, for her part, calmly smiled as she gazed at the conflicted Kojou.

“Perhaps you do not remember this, but you did not lose your comrades once or twice. You knew them for three months at the least, a half year at the most—comrades you had spent so much time getting to know have been taken from you, time and time again. That sense of loss, that despair, is carved into the very depths of your soul...becoming hatred toward the world itself.”

“That’s what you... That’s all that you were...using Onrai Island for...?!”

Kojou glared at Kako as he clenched his fists. The demonic energy he could not keep from trickling out became lightning that enveloped the entire area.

“Rui?! Yuno—?!”

As Kojou’s energy trickled out, Shizuri drew in a breath right beside him.

From the mist blanketing the open area emerged the former members of the Kasugaya Squad, seemingly at Kako’s beck and call. Rui carried not his sniper rifle but twin pistols for close combat. For her part, Yuno was already wearing her armored gloves. Their emotionless eyes gazed at Kojou and Shizuri like they

were enemies.

“A fine expression, Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella.” Watching as the paladin subconsciously backed away, Kako nodded, full of satisfaction.

Then, Kako summoned her third servant to that place. It was a small-statured figure, its entire body enveloped by a black robe. This was the enemy of unknown identity that had driven Kojou and the others into a corner in the *Carceri*. Its hand gripped the hilt of a single long sword still in its scabbard.

“Unfortunately, Onrai Island has reached its limits. Therefore, I shall grant you despair one final time: despair known as the truth—or so they say!” she said with a giggle.

The robed figure drew its sword.

From the hilt, a crimson blade surged like a billowing flame. Shizuri just barely managed to block the shock wave unleashed by it with her own sword. Unable to fully dull the blow even so, Shizuri wobbled backward.

“That attack... That’s impossible... Is that Hauras’s demonic energy release...?!”

Shizuri’s voice trembled as she was still poised to block attacks. The robed figure was gripping a crimson long sword that was exactly like Shizuri’s down to the tiniest details. Its ability—devouring the demonic energy of the opponents it sliced, using it to augment its own might—was also the same. This was, without a shadow of a doubt, Hauras.

The possessor of the new Hauras stripped off her pitch-black robe.

Appearing from beneath it was a girl with features identical to Shizuri’s.

She had white hair and blue eyes—and jade-colored horns jutting out from the sides of her head. The single difference was the black clothing. It was like looking at a mirror; Shizuri could not even raise her voice as she gazed at her other self.

“Allow me to introduce the creator of Onrai Island—the *real* Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella.” Kako walked behind the Shizuri in black as she spoke.

“The real...me...? Not Shinako...? The creator of Onrai Island is me...?!”

Shizuri's eyes wavered with fear. *Dark Shizuri* watched her eyes without any emotion in her own.

Kojou and Yuuma watched in silence as the Shizuris faced off against each other.

Kako raised an eyebrow with a questioning look. "You are not surprised, Kojou Akatsuki? I see; you must have realized it. I had forgotten that you are a pupil of Natsuki Minamiya..." Kako's shoulders fell with an air of disappointment.

Kojou made no reply. Kako's words were...half right.

The Prison Barrier magic employed by Natsuki Minamiya, constructing another realm within her own dream, was extremely specialized. The very nature of the magic meant that Natsuki herself had to remain sleeping within the barrier. In other words, the Natsuki that Kojou and others saw in their day-to-day reality was a double she had constructed through the use of magic.

Onrai Island had been constructed using the same variety of magic as Prison Barrier. It was not strange that the creator of Onrai Island might have been controlling a double in the same fashion as Natsuki.

Kojou had realized what Shizuri really was when he'd drunk her blood at the observation post. Yuuma and Natsuki, as witches, might well have realized at a far earlier stage.

Even if she was a doll produced with demonic energy, as long as there was actual blood flowing through her veins to convey her life force, there was no hindrance to vampiric activity whatsoever. That was why Shizuri herself had not realized when he'd drunk her blood.

She had not realized that she, herself, was the creator's double—

"A Prison Barrier is literally a dream created by its sleeping creator. You are a character appearing within that dream. You are a false paladin—your very existence is a fraud."

Kako continued, visibly mocking Shizuri. Dark Shizuri swung her own sword down toward her copy.

“It is not only you that is a fraud. Yuno Amase, Rui Minazumi, all the people residing on Onrai Island—*they* are the haunting spirits!”

“—?!”

Shizuri blocked Dark Shizuri’s—the creator’s—attack with her sword, but it made a high, tinny sound as it snapped at the base.

Still clenching her broken sword, Shizuri stumbled backward. Vitality had vanished from her face; her blue eyes were unfocused.

“You could not accept the fact that Gisella—that Shinako Kasugaya—had been unable to protect the Iroise evacuees. That is why you built a new Demon Sanctuary of your very own, using the demonic energy from the Four Holy Beasts amassed within Hauras, you see.”

The creator pointed her sword at Shizuri as the latter lost all will to fight. Kojou knew the color being given off by that blade. It was the same malignant radiance that had once covered the entire sky of Itogami Island—and the Demon Sanctuary of Iroise as well. It was the color of the Roses of Tartarus in bloom.

“Here on Onrai Island, you wanted Kojou Akatsuki to be by your side until the very end, but there shall be no more of that. Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella shall be no more, slain by her own true self—”

Kako’s words, seemingly to accentuate her fear, made Shizuri weakly shake her head.

What rose in her eyes was despair. She knew that the world she’d believed in was a construct, and that she herself was a fraud, and the truth stabbed her in the gut. As proof, her own true self was right before her very eyes.

No one could maintain their sanity under such conditions.

With Shizuri’s movements halted, Rui quietly turned his gun barrels toward her.

Lining up his aim with the defenseless Shizuri’s chest, he pulled the triggers.

The bullets were exploded out with a roar, but something deflected them before they could reach Shizuri. An enormous diamond crystal had appeared

right in front of her eyes.

“—Like hell!!”

Kojou leaped toward Rui, whose pistols spat fire in consecutive fashion. Every shot was impeded by the minute diamond crystals Kojou wore like armor over his entire body.

Kojou’s fist connected with Rui’s chin, sending him flying backward. It was precisely because the opponent was his friend that Kojou had not held back. He knew Rui’s true strength better than anyone. If his initial surprise attack had failed, Kojou’s skill was insufficient to defeat Rui without injury.

“I certainly do remember it clearly... The despair of losing people close to me, but...”

As Kojou landed, Yuno launched a mighty spinning kick toward him. Her kick, augmented by her boots, was blocked by Kojou’s crossed arms. He didn’t forget to move an extra step closer to Yuno and glide past the point of impact. It was Yuno herself who had taught him that over and over in training.

“Despair isn’t the only thing Onrai Island taught me. Thanks to that, I got to know these people, who I wouldn’t have met otherwise in my normal life. Attack Mage training was a fresh and interesting experience, too.”

Kojou smiled ferociously, a sight Shizuri gazed at with astonishment. *Oh, come on*, thought Kojou, inwardly exasperated. If Rui and Yuno were in proper form, that’d be another thing, but there was no reason for Kojou to lose to them while they were merely being controlled. Even if it did happen within a dream, the time he’d spent with them was real enough to him.

Yuno spun in midair, but what was thrust at him were both of her palms. It was a tricky, blunt-force maneuver that was Yuno’s personal specialty, Lion King Fist Number Four: Clawed Star—

“I know that move, too! Don’t underestimate Kasugaya Squad’s porter!”

Kojou swatted down Yuno’s attack with a demonic-energy-infused fist. Smacked into the ground back-first, Yuno’s small body bounced off it.

“K-Kojou...?!”

Shizuri stiffened in shock. No doubt she'd never even dreamed that Kojou could overwhelm Rui and Yuno to that degree.

"Geez," he said quietly, exhaling as he turned toward Shizuri, who continued standing in a daze. "And enough with that sorry look on your face!"

"Unyaa!!"

When Kojou grabbed her horns, Shizuri straightened her back and let out a silly-sounding yelp.

"Maybe your body is a fraud, made from demonic energy, but that doesn't mean who you are on the inside is a fraud, too, dammit! To me, you're the real Shizuri Kasugaya, and I won't let anyone tell me otherwise! Who can say the personality living her heart out inside a dream is the fraud, and the one watching the dream is the real one?!"

Keeping both hands thrust into Shizuri's wimple, Kojou peered into Shizuri's face. Her eyes, previously in a daze, had regained their vitality.

"You should take more pride in a dream built to save other people. And whoever tries to use what you made for stupid despair or whatever, I'll smash 'em flat!"

Kojou took his hands off Shizuri. However, Shizuri did not wobble. She stood firmly on her own two legs, glaring at the creator that was her own originator.

"Tee-hee," Yuuma giggled, passively observing, letting out a giggle full of satisfaction. Perhaps in Shizuri, she recognized herself, having once lost her own way only to be similarly lectured by Kojou.

He turned around and glared at Kako. He curled up the corners of his lips in an impetuous smile, baring his fangs.

"Now, let's get this show started, you shitty teacher... From here on, this is *my* fight!"

Kako's face twitched as Kojou's glare seemed to shoot right through her.

The change took only the tiniest of moments. Yet, that very second the Witch of the Dusk had tangibly lost her composure. Noticeably ashamed of that, Kako activated a large-scale spell.

From an enormous gate, Debris spawned—wanderers of the *Carceri*, Beast Vassals without a host.

But a silver flash cut those malevolent monsters down.

They had not been destroyed; they had been dissipated. The demonic energy that had brought the Debris into being had vanished as if it had never been there to begin with. In truth, the flash that felled the Debris was a small girl wielding a silver spear.

“No, Senpai. This is *our* fight—!”

Yukina Himeragi, emerging from within the white mist, was surrounded by a serene aura as she glared sternly toward Kako.

7

“Himeragi, sorry I’m late.” His eyes on her, Kojou spoke briefly—bluntly and short of an actual apology.

“Yes. I was delayed in freeing myself as well.”

Yukina’s reply was brief as well. Her voice seemed to proclaim she saw right through precisely how much Kojou had been hurt and how much he had repeatedly pushed himself beyond reason to arrive at that place.

The pair understood each other without a need for words. It left Yuuma making a pained smile and Shizuri dumbfounded—or perhaps it was an exasperated expression rising over her.

“This time, I am just a tiny bit angry myself.” Yukina shifted a glacial stare toward Kako.

Kako made a face as if she wanted to click her tongue. It seemed she had a good idea why Yukina would be so upset.

Without warning, Yukina swung her spear toward the space behind her. With a dazzling flash, the single arc she traced rent the misty air covering the church at the center of the open space.

This was not one of the powers of Yukina’s spear. The abilities of Snowdrift

Wolf were to nullify demonic energy and to rend any kind of barrier. The might to slice space itself apart was utterly beyond it.

However, this was an alternate realm constructed from demonic energy. Snowdrift Wolf's ability to nullify demonic energy was the same as the power to erase the world itself.

"I am the one who watches him. You abducted Akatsuki-senpai without my knowledge. You created artificial despair in an attempt to hurt Senpai. And even here and now, you continue to deceive Miss Kasugaya!"

As Yukina swung her spear, the mist brightened, and the world it hid came into view.

This was the seventh stratum of the *Carceri*, the deepest portion, said to have been visited by none.

Ahead of the stonework chamber was green-covered earth brimming with flowers. Upon a gentle slope, a great throng of people lay with their eyes closed. Their numbers surely comfortably exceeded five thousand souls.

They looked like dead waiting to be buried, but Kojou realized that they wore peaceful expressions.

They were merely asleep.

They were simply dreaming—

"The residents of Onrai Island are not haunting spirits. They are just like Miss Kasugaya. They are here in the deepest part of Onrai Island, continuing to dream."

Having finished destroying the barrier, Yukina stabbed her spear into the ground.

Kako touched her hand to her cheek, annoyed. Even so, she made no effort to repudiate Yukina's words.

To save six thousand evacuees from Iroise's destruction, Gisella had employed the Prison Barrier ritual, transferring the people into the barrier world.

Likely, Shinako Kasugaya was the one to prepare the Prison Barrier. All Shizuri had done was carry on the caster's—Shinako's—will, taking over control of the

demonic energy maintaining that barrier.

But with Shinako's death, Shizuri was unable to unlock the barrier world and free the people within. And for that six-year span of time, Onrai Island had persisted, adrift in another realm.

Meaning, it was Kako Magatoki, the Witch of the Dusk, who had located Onrai Island and used nano-*shikigami* to carry out her own objectives.

"What Miss Kasugaya did was not futile at all. She saved the evacuees of Iroise...as a Paladin of Gisella."

A crack ran along the surface of the ground at Yukina's feet. The earth of Onrai Island quaked ferociously.

The propagation of the anti-nano-*shikigami* spread by Asagi and Lydianne, as well as Yukina's destruction of the barrier, had accelerated the destruction of that world. There was but one additional condition necessary to liberate the barrier world—waking up Shizuri, the creator.

"So that...was the reality all along."

A sigh trickled out from Shizuri's lips. Gradually, it changed into laughter. It was the voice of the normal Shizuri Kasugaya: as dead serious as she was domineering, enough to think her wholly impertinent yet meddlesome and soft-hearted to the core.

"Even if it is inside a dream, I am myself. I have finally had my fill of continuing to sleep. It is high time to smack myself awake with my own two hands!"

Shizuri strongly gripped her sword hilt with both hands. The long sword supposedly broken off at its base was enveloped in a crimson radiance that restored it to its former state. In truth, Onrai Island was the dream of its creator. In other words, it was a world where reality was what Shizuri, an offshoot of its creator, willed it to be. That moment, the creator's power to influence that world was exceeded by Shizuri's own.

"Goodness... It seems I've somewhat failed. I really had thought I'd finally obtained a wonderful laboratory..."

Kako languidly shook her head. Her words were no admission of guilt toward

Kojou and the others. Even though she rued not having quit while she was ahead, she surely did not have the slightest intention of ceasing resistance and surrendering.

Her use of the word *laboratory* made her position crystal clear. She was a former officer of LCO. Apparently, she too remained loyal to the tenets she learned from LCO's self-righteous sorcerers: that there was nothing too criminal or taboo if it was for the sake of their own research.

"So on that note—or so I would like to say, but it would seem you will not let me escape."

Pulling a grimoire out from thin air, Kako opened it with a callous smile.

At the same time Kako activated her magic, malevolent demonic energy gushed out of the sword of the creator—the Shizuri in black clothing. This energy became a vortex above Kako's and the others' heads, transforming into an enormous beast. It was a ferocious, three-headed dog tens of meters in length. It was a pitch-black Debris with flames swirling around it.

"That's a...Debris...?! What's this demonic energy...?!"

Looking up at the rampaging, ferocious, pitch-black hound, Kojou's eyes grew grave.

This phantom beast was beyond the scale of what a Witch could summon as a familiar. Its vast demonic energy rivaled the Beast Vassals of the primogenitors themselves. Also, Kojou knew of beings that greatly resembled them.

"I see... Debris are actually Tartarus Lapse's Beast Vassals!"

Kojou's shocked exclamation made Kako smile and nod. Kako was calling forth the power of the Four Holy Beasts' demonic energy—which Shinako Kasugaya had sealed with Hauras at the cost of her life—and controlling them as so-called Debris.

Yuuma spoke as she walked in front of Kojou. "This world is on the border of day and night, life and death, dream and reality... Controlling those things is her true power. That is why they call her the Witch of the Dusk, She Who Rules the Twilight."

Behind her slowly arose the form of a faceless blue knight. Yuuma's duty was to hunt LCO remnants. Capturing Kako had been her original objective.

"Correct, Witch of the Blue. Beast Vassals without hosts and varieties of undead are all my faithful servants, you see," Kako said, displeased. She'd no doubt realized that Yuuma, a witch on the same level as her, had commanded her own Guardian to interfere with Kako's spatial manipulation.

Unless and until Kako defeated Yuuma, she could not leave Onrai Island. Kako's plan, running away while her Debris ran amok, had already fizzled out.

That being the case, Kako's option for her next action was limited to one.

"Crepuscule!"

Kako summoned her own Guardian. Its entire body was covered in black mist. It was a devil's vassal with the appearance of a skeleton. Gripped in its hands was an enormous scythe reminiscent of that of a Grim Reaper. The monster, resembling a devilish creature that appeared during the twilight, suited the Witch of the Dusk well.

"Kojou, I'm leaving the summoned beast to you. She's mine—!"

Yuuma ordered the blue knight to attack. Its downward-swinging sword was swallowed up by thin air, with the blade alone protruding from the air at Kako's back. It was a surprise attack using spatial manipulation. Even a master could not see it coming, yet Kako evaded the blow with incredible reaction speed.

"...?!"

The giant scythe blow unleashed by Crepuscule was in turn just barely blocked by the blue knight. As the blue knight was thrown heavily off balance, Kako's Guardian added another fierce attack.

"Snowdrift Wolf!"

With Yuuma's Guardian backed into a corner, Yukina gave support, assaulting Kako's Guardian from the flank. Yet, the Grim Reaper easily parried aside even this, slicing toward Yukina in turn.

Yukina defended against that attack, moving as if she knew it was coming in advance. The special ability of the Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency was

to peer a brief moment into the future. Even with that Future Sight ability, she could not keep track of Kako's Guardian. Yukina and Yuuma's tag team was just barely fending off Crepuscule's slicing attacks, too vicious for the naked eye to track.

For his part, Kojou did not have the luxury of lending the pair his support.

The pitch-black Debris was rampaging above the six thousand evacuees that remained asleep.

It was no doubt Kako's original intent to have the Debris assault the evacuees, using the opportunity to flee. Cor-Tauri Succinum, Al-Nasl Minium, and Dabih Crystallus—Kojou had summoned the three Beast Vassals comparatively suited to defense to fend off the Debris, yet even so, it took everything he had just to keep harm from befalling the evacuees. Thanks to the cross fire of flame spewed out from the creature's three heads, he didn't have a clue how to counterattack. Such underhanded means were very much like Kako.

"Miss Yuuma! The book the Witch of the Dusk possesses is most likely a temporal manipulation ritual grimoire!"

Yukina endured the Grim Reaper's attacks as she conveyed the information she'd gleaned from The Blood.

"Temporal manipulation ritual?! I see; she's accelerating herself—!"

Comprehension rose into Yuuma's eyes.

Kako's Guardian specialized in manipulating others, so there had to be no way it was combat-oriented. The proof was in the fact that its one-sided onslaught had failed to defeat Yuuma and Yukina.

What made Kako's Guardian a menace was its overwhelming speed—and, now that they knew it was the grimoire granting it, coming up with a countermeasure was not all that difficult.

"Le Bleu!"

Along with her Guardian, Yuuma vanished from sight, only to appear above Kako's head. Then, swinging an arm downward, Yuuma unleashed an invisible shock wave.

It was a surprise attack delivered from a blind spot, yet Kako's Grim Reaper easily obstructed it.

"A teleport and a shock wave created by spatial contortion? It's like a cheap knock-off of Natsuki Minamiya. Do you truly intend to capture me with borrowed power?"

Kako spoke to Yuuma in a taunting tone of voice. Yuuma used a second teleport to put distance between herself and Kako. At first glance, Yuuma's attack had been completely meaningless, a futile expenditure of demonic energy. And yet...

"I don't deny that it's borrowed power, but you're wrong, Kako Magatoki!"

Yuuma touched a hand to the ground at her own feet. Demonic energy coursed atop the stonework, changing only a portion of their surface to a different color. Emerging over them were characters arranged in meticulous lines—text recorded in a grimoire.

"The original wielder of my power isn't Master Minamiya, it's Aya Tokoyogi—Kako Magatoki, you've *let* me see your grimoire!"

The lines of text completely materialized, sending a powerful surge of demonic energy scattering about.

A so-called grimoire was an "object of power" that had accumulated its own demonic energy through powerful thoughts from people over long months and years. Under normal circumstances, merely copying the text did not grant the power in and of itself. Yet, in spite of this, the lines of text Yuuma had written were emitting a surge equal to Kako's own grimoire.

"Grimoire reproduction?! I see, because you are the Witch of the Notaria's daughter...!"

Kako's expression twisted in unease. Yuuma's mother—Aya Tokoyogi, dubbed the Witch of the Notaria—possessed the power to reproduce any grimoire from her own memories.

Through using a copy of the temporal manipulation ritual, Yuuma was canceling out Kako's magic. This returned Kako's Guardian from its accelerated state back to the normal flow of time.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Using that momentary opportunity, Yukina danced, her lips weaving a solemn chant. Explosive ritual energy coursed into her silver spear, further amplifying the ritual engraved within.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

Yukina’s demonic-energy-nullifying spear became a flash of light, running Kako’s Guardian clean through. Kako let out an incredibly anguished cry from the pain coursing backward from the devil’s familiar.

In that instant, the attacks from the Debris under Kako’s control came to a halt. To Kojou, searching for an opportunity to counterattack, his long-awaited moment had arrived.

“C’mon over, Regulus Aurum—!”

Kojou’s newly summoned Beast Vassal became a bolt of lightning, punching through the pitch-black Debris.

The Debris’s sundered flesh became countless black rose petals dancing in the sky, all of them gradually crumbling to dust and vanishing into thin air.

“It’s over, teach...”

Breathing raggedly, Kojou turned back and looked at Kako, on the ground with an anguished expression. Somehow, Yukina and Yuuma were safe and sound. Both were pretty exhausted, but he couldn’t see any eye-catching external wounds.

However, Kojou had no time to feel relieved. Onrai Island’s ground began to quake.

The vast demonic energy maintaining the barrier having dissipated, it had finally begun to collapse.

As Kojou and the others swallowed and watched, Shizuri addressed the creator. “It’s time to wake up, isn’t it, Shizuri?”

The girls with white hair raised their swords against each other. The pair’s poses were mirror images, perfectly identical.

The girls cautiously closed the distance, simultaneously raising their swords high.

That instant, a holy chant quietly flowed from the white-clothed Shizuri's mouth.

“—This fang is the light rending our darkness. This breath is the flame that sweeps away evil. Thy name is that of the fire-eating snake. Born from the soul of a Saint, thy blade is immutable.”

It was a holy chant permitted only to a Paladin of Gisella, true wielder of the secret armament, Hauras. When, for the first time, Shizuri spoke those words of her own volition, the eyes of the creator—the other Shizuri—faintly wavered.

Who moved first?

The girls' swords swung downward. The pair's forms overlapped, becoming a single silhouette.

That instant, Kojou's and the others' fields of vision were dyed white.

The ground at their feet vanished, enveloping them with a floating feeling.

A powerful sense of dizziness and disorientation assaulted them. It felt like they were falling without end.

It was as if Onrai Island had awoken from a very long dream.

Kojou could not see either Shizuri. He did not know the outcome of their battle.

But just before he lost consciousness from the impact, Kojou was certain that he'd heard her voice.

“Victory is ours,” she said.



OUTRO

OUTRO

Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella was in a hospital waiting room, rooted to the spot.

There was a vending machine right next to her. It had a large liquid crystal display with images of various kinds of drinks and logos from famous coffee chains. However, she did not know how to use the machine. Perhaps it was because this was a foreign land unfamiliar to Shizuri; or maybe the methods used to operate such machines had greatly changed during the six years she had been asleep. It could have been the vending machine simply wasn't user-friendly. *Yes, that's got to be the case*, thought Shizuri, glaring resentfully at the vending machine.

Just then, someone's voice addressed her. "Hello. Pleased to meet you. By any chance, are you having a hard time?"

Shizuri warily turned around.

Standing there with a warm, pleasant smile on her face was a small-statured girl dressed in pajamas. Her black eyes were large, and she had an adorable face. Her long hair was tied up short behind her head.

"Y-yes... Perhaps you could teach me how to buy a drink from this machine..."

Shizuri's slightly hesitant reply brought a deep, sympathetic-looking nod from the girl.

Due to being inside a hospital, Shizuri was not wearing her wimple. The girl had to have noticed the presence of her horns, but she showed no sign whatsoever of minding.

"This vending machine is a tough one to understand, huh? First, you have to touch the sensor with your card. Do that and it'll let you pick the product you want. After that, you pick whatever drink and size you want and press the confirm button at the end. *R* and *L* means "regular" and "large," and you pick your toppings with this button over here."

"R-right..."

The girl's explanation was quick and wordy, but strangely, it was easy to understand. *In contrast to her baby-face appearance, the girl must have a good head on her shoulders*, thought Shizuri.

Following the girl's explanation, she operated the touch panel-style display, and the drink she desired popped out with ease, making her consternation up to a few moments prior seem like a mirage. She'd chosen hot royal milk tea.

"Thank you. I am grateful for your kindness."

"No, no, you are very welcome." The girl gave a pleasant, grinning smile as she too operated the vending machine. Her selection was a chocolate drink with a large helping of fresh cream. *I should have chosen that one myself*, thought Shizuri, secretly jealous.

"I'm glad to have been of service. This one gave me a hard time at first, too."

"Are you also hospitalized...?" Replying without any deep thought, Shizuri immediately regretted her rather unrestrained question.

However, the girl showed no sign of particularly minding. "That's right," she said with a display of easily recognized chagrin. "It'll be almost a month any day now. It's not like I have an illness. My spiritual energy was just super-exhausted. It's because my older brother is so overprotective. I'm bored stiff thanks to him."

"I understand. This week I, too, have nothing but tests. As I have spent the last six years asleep, it cannot be helped, but I am quite fed up with it already," Shizuri spontaneously said along similar lines.

It had been the day before yesterday when the six thousand people of Onrai Island, herself included, had been freed.

Normally, having such great numbers of refugees come pressing close all at once would have resulted in falling into a large panic, but Asagi Aiba's prior arrangements had ensured there was no eye-catching ruckus to be had. Perhaps that was as much the Ark of the Sinful God and its vast horde of artificial isles surrounding them as anything else; there was plenty of land to spare.

The evacuees were largely in good physical health, and their mental distress

had not been particularly great.

Shizuri was the only one who was ferociously depleted. This was why she was admitted to the hospital the same day and subjected to a diet of examinations like this.

“Six years,” said the girl, echoing Shizuri’s words as she adopted a thousand-yard stare. “I see... One of my friends is a girl trapped in a deep sleep, too... There’s so much I want to talk with her about, so I’ve been waiting all this time for her to wake up, but...”

Shizuri felt some kind of deep, impenetrable anguish and sadness from the girl’s murmur. *Perhaps this girl has experienced even greater misfortune than I*, Shizuri unwittingly felt.

Despite that, the girl immediately had a cheerful smile, shaking off all hint of sadness. “But thank you. Thanks to you, I’m brimming with hope.”

“It is nothing. Um, I was also saved by a precious friend, you see,” Shizuri admitted, feeling less like she was comforting the girl than excusing herself.

“Wow, really? By what kind of friend?”

The girl bit into the topic with greater vigor than anticipated. It seemed that she truly was bored from prolonged hospital life.

Shizuri felt a little overwhelmed by the girl’s vigor, and the face of that precious friend arose in her thoughts.

“If I were to describe him in one phrase, he is a most high-maintenance man. He is rude and ill-mannered, dense and violent, and if you take your eyes off him for even a moment, he will immediately get into trouble... That is why I must properly keep watch over him!”

“O-oh...”

For some reason, a conflicted look came over the girl as she made that frail utterance.

There really are similar people in this world, huh, she muttered to herself in a reflective tone of voice. It seemed that the girl had someone close to her with a personality greatly resembling that man’s. *She must go through considerable*

difficulties herself, thought Shizuri, feeling a sense of kinship, when...

“But I bet you love him, right?”

“Huh...?!” The girl’s sudden assertion made Shizuri clear her throat ferociously. “L-love...?! N-no... You are mistaken! That is utterly out of bounds, for me at least. Certainly I did let him touch me that one time, but that was because he was so adamant, and I...”

Shizuri clutched her head as she squatted down. Her face glowed bright red. Shizuri’s maidenly reaction made the girl peer at her with deep interest.

“Huh,” said the girl, tilting her head. She was staring at the tote bag placed at Shizuri’s feet. The bag contained brand-new clothes wrapped in vinyl. *It’s inconvenient not to have a change of clothes*, Asagi had astutely noted when bringing her those clothes.

“Hey, this uniform—”

“It is the uniform of the school I shall be transferring to next month. The formalities for enrollment and the entrance exam have yet to take place, though. Saikai Private Academy, I believe?”

“Eh, really?! What year?”

The girl leaned her body forward in apparent surprise. Shizuri recoiled as if mildly fearful.

“Th...third year of middle school, as a matter of fact...”

“Hee-hee-hee. I see. Guess that makes me your senior. Nagisa Akatsuki. Pleased to meet you.” Smiling happily as she spoke, the girl in pajamas offered her right hand.

The girl’s words made Shizuri’s heart leap. “A-Akatsuki...?”

Sweat dripped down Shizuri’s back. Shizuri did not know how common a family name *Akatsuki* was in that nation. However, it seemed far too ominous to dismiss as coincidence.

When Shizuri thought about it more, the people who had brought her to that hospital, as well as arranged which school she would enroll in, were people connected to that boy. There was nothing strange at all about his little sister

being there.

The problem was her misunderstanding that Shizuri was in love with him.

If she realized that the “him” in question was her own older brother—

“Incidentally, this has been bugging me since earlier but...can I touch those horns a little?”

Nagisa Akatsuki clasped both hands together as she continued gazing at Shizuri’s face. “Eh,” Shizuri muttered, freezing in place.

“Please, just for a little bit. Just the tips, pretty please!”

“...?!”

Staring at Nagisa making that request in an adorable way, Shizuri became certain, beyond a shadow of any doubt, that they were siblings.

This was Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella’s first step into a life of turmoil, trials, and tribulations in the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island.



“This is your afternoon schedule.”

A particularly grave expression came over the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki, in a government office building room in the very center of Itogami Island—Keystone Gate. A tablet device had been placed before his eyes. The tightly packed lines of the schedule were written in text small enough that it was illegible unless he squinted.

“Six meetings with industry, three courtesy meetings with ambassadors of various nations, eight internal Gigafloat Management Corporation meetings. The documents requiring your signature are over here. The budget for next year must be finalized by the end of this month. Please memorize the important points of the documents over here...by tomorrow.”

Asagi Aiba, dressed in a suit like a capable secretary, spoke in a businesslike tone. The outfit was essentially a type of cosplay so that government and corporate VIPs would not underestimate her when meeting her face to face, but it meshed with her extravagant looks mysteriously well. One might even say it suited her terrifyingly well.

Kojou timidly raised a hand. “Um...Miss Asagi?”

“What is it, Fourth Primogenitor?” Asagi’s reply was curt, full of composure. Kojou creaked under the pressure as he continued his words.

“I’ve only just finished supplemental lessons during spring break, you know...”

“Yes. What of it?”

“What’s with this ultra-dense schedule?! There’s only a total of fifteen minutes for meals altogether, and three hours to sleep across two days—are you trying to kill me?!”

“You’re the one who went off and disappeared for three days! How much trouble do you think I went through making this schedule?! On top of that, there are temporary entry passes and public assistance for six thousand people, and on top of *that*, construction of temporary housing and the like. I’ll be signing paperwork until tomorrow.”

Slam. Asagi angrily snarled as she violently pounded the table, leaving Kojou at a loss for words. It accurately reflected how he was rocked back, yet had nothing he could say in reply.

“H-Himeragi...”

Kojou frailly sought aid from Yukina, standing at his side.

Yukina Himeragi, her body clad in a black suit in the style of a bodyguard, coolly looked down at Kojou.

“I have been ordered by the Lion King Agency to observe Senpai, and that is all.”

She spoke in a dismissive tone, essentially declaring, *I have no intention of interfering with the Fourth Primogenitor’s duties as liege of his Dominion.*

All that said, Yukina had been helping Kojou with everything under the sun until a few days before. Her aid had been a large factor in Kojou somehow making tangible progress with it.

Put another way, Kojou couldn’t have managed whatsoever without Yukina’s aid.

“Y-Yuuma...”

“Sorry, but I have to get back to the Attack Mages. The investigation of the Witch of the Dusk is still ongoing, and I have to write up some reports, you see.”

Wearing a suit of her own, Yuuma Tokoyogi replied bluntly. Her expression was as amicable as usual, but for some reason, the smile did not reach her eyes.

“Hey, Kojou. About the extra expenses for those Iroise evacuees countermeasures...if we patent the data Asagi got by analyzing those nano-*shikigami*, we could cover the expenses using the patent fees—what’s with the atmosphere here?”

Motoki Yaze, entering the room with a thick file under one arm, widened his eyes and raised his brows when he detected the perilous atmosphere hovering in the room.

“Why’s everyone glaring at Kojou? Ah...because he drank Missy Kasugaya’s blood behind everyone’s back?”

“Yaze, you idiot...!!”

“!!” “.....!” “.....”

Yaze spoke with a needlessly astute-sounding tone of voice. The already tense atmosphere within the room decisively creaked. However, Yaze seemed not to read that atmosphere at all, making a deliberately exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

“Well, the situation was what it was. Emergency and all that.”

“Y-yeah, that’s right.” Kojou made slight nods over and over.

In that situation, to save Shizuri and Onrai Island, drinking her blood had been an unavoidable emergency act of survival.

The fact Yukina and the others hadn’t complained to Kojou’s face surely meant that they understood as much. *Tell ’em more, why don’t ya?* said Kojou’s expression.

Leave it to me, nodded Yaze.

“Besides, if a girl like that goes into a hot spring with him, even Kojou’s gonna

find her irresistible. She might be a babe in the woods when it comes to sexy stuff, but Missy Kasugaya is still pretty easy on the eyes. Young, too.”

“...Young?”

Some follow-up, thought Kojou, unwittingly slumping against the table when the last of Yaze’s words made him lift up his face with a questioning look.

“You didn’t know? Missy Kasugaya’s younger than us. According to the documents, she’s chronologically twenty this year, but her physical age is still fourteen. That’s ’cause the caster of Prison Barrier is basically sleeping in suspended animation.”

“Oh...is that right, now...?”

Kojou, gazing at the data on Shizuri that Yaze presented to him, abruptly broke into a little smile.

Thanks to her haughty demeanor, he hadn’t pegged her as someone younger than he was, but now that he mentioned it, Shizuri did seem awfully young in contrast to her big-sister attitude.

There was also her being shaken by Rui and Yuno hooking up and that her knowledge of affairs of romance was oddly childish. There was also her physique.

“I see. It’s too early to give up, then.”

Kojou made that off-handed murmur as he gazed at the breast-enhanced photo printout of Shizuri included with the documents.

“Where are you looking as you say that, Senpai?”

As Kojou did so, Yukina glared intently at him, tapering her lips in a visible pout.



“Yukina Himeragi... Himeragi, huh...?”

Gazing at the slowly rotating 3D image, *she* narrowed her eyes with amusement.

Reproduced by CG, the appearance of the girl named Yukina Himeragi had,

even by the most modest assessment, quite beautiful features. Though she was small of stature, her physique was quite refined, her limbs delicate. She had a comely face and eyes from which she could sense a glint of powerful will. Her fairly classic hairstyle and school uniform bore their own respective charm.

“More than that, so young! Hey, Moegi, have you seen this image?”

She called out to her older sister-in-law while lying, still dressed in a bathrobe, faceup on the lab room’s sofa.

The girl, clothed in white with a vibrant face, stopped the hand with which she was tapping an electronic keyboard and she looked back.

“I saw. You call her young, but she’s the same age as you are now, right?”

“I mean, yeah, but it just feels weird. It feels strange that that girl went through a time like this, too.”

She giggled, smiling as she rose to her feet. The glossy black hair she’d inherited from her mother danced with a flutter. Large, white canine teeth poked out from her shapely lips.

“Take this seriously. You understand what your job is, yes?”

The sister-in-law clothed in white made a weary-sounding sigh. Amid the little screen of her device, an AI avatar in the form of a teddy bear went “Keh-keh” and made a crooked smile.



Placed directly in front of the sister-in-law was a metallic pedestal about five meters across.

It seemed both like a parabola antenna for measuring something and an electromagnetic turret for firing something or other. Or perhaps it looked like a stage—the sort on which priestesses made holy dances to the music of the gods.

“I get it, sheesh. You’re such a worrywart, Moegi,” the girl said as she operated the device.

The screen switched, and new 3D images floated up one after another. One was an extravagant, beautiful girl improperly wearing her uniform in an adorable fashion. One was a boy with a flippant, smiling face with headphones dangling from his neck. One was an amiable-looking girl with her hair tied up. And one was a vampire with a languid expression hovering over him— “You can’t take any luggage with you, so you have until you leave to memorize all these faces.”

“It’s all right. I’ve already memorized them.”

It’s not like they’re people I don’t know, the girl murmured inside her own mind.

Not that she could hear that voice, but her older sister let out a sigh once more.

A small alarm sounded. It was an electronic noise from the device alerting them of the time that the experiment was scheduled to begin.

“Are you ready?”

“Anytime.”

The girl shot a confident grin at her worried older sister.

The lighting in the laboratory dimmed, which was less her sister being considerate than the electrical supply being diverted to the experimental device. The girl showed no particular hesitation as she smoothly stripped off the bathrobe.

Her pale, naked body was highlighted amid the dim emergency lighting.

The girl had not a single stitch of clothing on and carried only a golden spear. Still clutching that spear, the girl stepped onto the metallic platform.

“—Reina.”

“What, Moegi?” The girl smiled as she gazed at her sister-in-law.

A synthetic voice narrating the countdown echoed within the laboratory room. Thick cables deployed in a spiral glowed dimly as vast magical energy coursed through them.

Magical energy gathered from every corner of the artificial isle was converging upon the metal platform.

This was a large-scale sorcerous device meant to support a temporal shift ritual.

Just before the countdown finished, Reina saw a seemingly bashful Moegi waving to her.

“Be careful. Take care of Papa Fourth Primogenitor and company for me.”

The girl listened to the gentle voice of her older sister-in-law as her consciousness was swallowed up by light...

Afterword

So there was some demolition work.

Not at my place but the building next door to my workplace.

Trucks and construction machines were going in and out, swapping places with one another from early morning to late evening. The resounding roars. The fragments of concrete scattering away. The floor at my workplace shook enough that it could be mistaken for a 4D theater, and if I blithely opened a curtain, I would go through the hell of being eyeball to eyeball with unfamiliar construction dudes. To deal with the boisterous noise, I wore headphones and played music quite a lot, though on occasion I gave up partway and retreated home or to a family restaurant, but at any rate, there is no mistaking that this work was written in the cruelest environment of the entire series. This precious experience made me appreciate the untold happiness of being able to write in a room that isn't shaking and without noise in my ears. It was really rough.

Anyway, the demolition work finally finished, so just as I expected I would be able to write the next volume on a real tear, the end of the building demolition naturally meant that construction of a new building would now begin. These cruel days shall continue awhile longer, but I still think I will deliver the next volume a little faster. I humbly ask for your best regards.

So there you have it, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 16 with the much-awaited Part Two.

More precisely, rather than a Part Two, this volume feels a little, or a lot, like it was written as a prologue. There were things I was trying that wouldn't have worked if the timing had been any different, so if you had fun with it, great. I've talked Part Two up to such a grand extent, I wondered if some might consider this volume's contents to be some kind of bait and switch.

From the next volume onward will be the new series in earnest. I'm not sure

which will come out first, but I am preparing a short-story compilation volume in parallel, so I'd really be happy if you picked that up, too.

I believe you are already aware of this, but the second season of the *Strike the Blood* OVA is scheduled to go on sale right around the time this volume is to be published. It starts with "The Black Sword Shaman" as recorded in the ninth novel volume. This is an episode I personally like very much, so I'm really pleased. It'll be lots of fun. They had me write a little short story to go with the first printing.

Also, the ninth collected volume of the comic version of *Strike the Blood* serialized in *Monthly Comic Dengeki Daioh* has gone on sale. I humbly ask that you give it your best regards, too.

I guess this is the last part.

To Manyako, who's handling the illustrations for this novel; TATE, who's handling the comic version; everyone related to the anime version; and everyone involved in the production and distribution of this book, I salute you from the bottom of my heart.

And of course, I unreservedly thank all of you who have read this book.

I very much hope to see you again in the next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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